DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 550 CS 012 661

AUTHOR Knopp, Katherine C.
TITLE The Eye of the Other: Reading Difference in Language and Literature.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 93p.; Ed.D. Project, Teachers College, Columbia University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Undetermined (040)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Cultural Differences; Elementary Secondary Education; English Instruction; Literary Criticism; Metaphors; *Multicultural Education; Novels; *Reader Text Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Reading Uses

ABSTRACT

Combining academic prose, some narrative, a poem, and some literary criticism, this project paper presents a theoretical framework for the literature base of the curriculum the teacher hopes to make operational on various levels over several years. The first section of the paper discusses the goals and various approaches of multicultural education. The second section focuses on how readers see, know, and create the world. The third section of the paper discusses in depth how a class worked through Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eye." The fourth section "leaps" from linguistics to literature, discussing linguistic anchors in social space, the role of metaphors in generating vision and defining ways of seeing, and what all this has to do with reading. The fifth section of the paper offers two examples that seek to combine the goals of multicultural education with the academic rigor and cultural capital associated with authors like Shakespeare. Contains 75 notes and 55 references. (RS)

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ED 402 550

The Eye of the Other

Reading Difference in Language and Literature

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A Project submitted for partial requirement of Ed. M. Spring 1996

The Klingenstein Center
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, New York 10027

by

Katherine C. Knopp
Holderness School
Plymouth, NH 03264
043-68-4114

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Preface

When I pulled this project from the bag of ideas I keep in my classroom desk, I knew that it was too big. In fact, I apologized for its size and scope in the two page proposal which launched my reading and writing. I realize, now, that after a year at Teachers College, I have just begun.

This paper represents one piece of the entire project. It is the theoretical framework for the literature base of the curriculum I hope to make operational on various levels over the next several years. The theoretical frame for the telecommunication section has been researched, but not written. The actual stories to be used and the writing assignments which will ask students to examine 'sites of learning' in stories will be designed by the three teachers -Ray Pultinas at Dewitt-Clinton, Candy Systra at The School for the Physical City, and me.

I've created a collage. You'll find some academic prose, some narrative, a poem, and some literary criticism in this project. My hope is that the alchemy will create an understanding of the power of a good piece of literature and a lively discussion of various voices around it to transport people to new and multiple understandings.

Acknowledgements

This journey began in my classroom in Plymouth, New Hampshire, and so I want to thank my students before I thank anyone else. My students at Holderness continue to teach me about life and literature, and I am grateful to them for their fresh curiosity, ruthless candor, and their unending capacity to ask,"so what?"

I want also to thank Holderness School and The Klingenstein Center for making this year of reading ,writing and thinking possible. All writing is, on some level, collaborative and I am grateful to the Klingenstein Fellows for all the knocking around of ideas.

Thanks especially to Pearl Kane, Clifford Hill, and Ruth Vinz for their courses and for nudging me now and again, to read in a different direction or to consider my ideas again.

What follows is a list of the authors (in no particular order) whose voices occupy the halls of my brain and whose words have echoed, resonated, and haunted me until I was willing to think in new ways.

Jerome Bruner
Diane Brunner
Lucille Clifton
Frances McCue
Ruth Vinz
Annie Dillard
Heidi Hayes Jacobs
Carol Gilligan
Deborah Tannen
Shirley Brice Heath
Robert Coles
Michael Awkward
Toni Morrison
Sven Birkerts
Frank Smith
Deborah Meiers
Ted Sizer
Sherry Turkle
Lisa Delpit
Vivian Paley
W.E.B. Dubois
Sara L. Lightfoot
Julia Kristeva
Cornel West
Paulo Freire
Maxine Greene
Christopher Clark
bell hooks
Nancy Martin
James Banks

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What is Multicultural Education?

> "If we are to successfully educate all of our children, we must work to remove the blinders built of stereotypes, monocultural instructional methodologies, ignorance, social distance, biased research, and racism. We must work to destroy those blinders so that it is possible to really see, to really know the students we teach...I pray for all of us the strength to teach our children what they must learn, and the humility and wisdom to learn from them so that we might better teach."
>
> -Lisa Delpit *Other People's Children.*

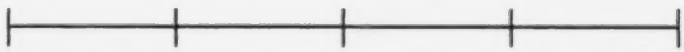
To speak of 'multicultural education' requires considerable care in defining terms and making clear one's attitudes and expectations about what constitutes culture and about the goals and aims of education. The discourse around multicultural education is rich and complicated, and it is central to our efforts to prepare an increasingly diverse population for life and citizenship in a pluralistic democracy. James Banks, a leader in the field, begins his recent book *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* by stating the essence of the aims of multicultural education.

> Education within a pluralistic society should affirm and help students understand their home and community cultures. However, it should also help free them from their cultural boundaries. To create and maintain a civic community that works for the common good, education in a democratic society should help students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they will need to participate in civic action to make society more equitable and just.[1]

[1] James Banks, *An Introduction to Multiculturalism* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994), 1.

It is difficult to argue with the goals as they are stated here, yet the multicultural education movement has sparked considerable debate in schools and in schools of education nationwide. The debate slides along a continuum of perspectives, the poles of which are commonly called "cultural pluralism" and "assimilationism." Cultural pluralism was originally defined by Horace Kallen in 1974 and its main tenets include accepting and continuing to accept the values of other cultures, their beliefs, customs, social codes and political traditions. In this model all cultures are viewed as equal and ought to be respected and valued for their own coherence, sense of integrity and logic. Cultural pluralism describes a true 'multi' - culturally model where many cultures co-exist, are valued and respected as their own entities and there is no attempt to take pieces from them in order to combine them into one.

At the other pole is the "assimilation" model. While believers in this model accept the importance of understanding multiple beliefs systems and respecting many cultures, the main goal is the amalgamation of all group into the mainstream. This belief encourages cross-cultural understanding, and holds as its premise that students will learn from other cultures and adopt pieces of cultures which complement their own. The goal here is to embrace and blend all cultures into one pluralistic community.



The debate over the literary canon is the most popular forum for arguing these two points of view. It appears regularly in the popular press. Should our students be required to read Homer, Plato, Dante, Milton? In the *New York Times* on June 5, 1988 an article entitled "The Battle of the Books" by James Atlas chronicled the academy's struggle with canonicity. "Why should Melville and Emerson dominate the syllabus? argued renegade professors from Johns Hopkins and Northwestern, Queens College and Berkeley." In 1987 students at Stanford marched with Jesse Jackson and chanted, "Hey, Hey, ho ho, Western culture's got to go." Educators and politicians and eventually publishers of anthologies and textbooks were forced to choose sides. As the debate has become a discussion, it is clear that any efforts to create 'multicultural education' will necessarily fall somewhere along the continuum between cultural pluralism and assimilationism. Both philosophies need to run beneath different parts of multicultural goals in educating children for a pluralistic, yet united democracy.

The word 'multiculturalism' has become problematic because of the polarity of the debate. It has come to be associated with a denial of all western culture and a sense of relativism run rampant. If we examine the roots of the movement to diversify educational practices, however, we find that multicultural education, originally called intercultural education, emerged in the 1920s from Western democratic ideals. Indeed, Banks argues that:

> One of its major aims is to close the gap between the Western democratic ideals of equality and justice and the societal practices that contradict those ideals, such as discrimination based on race, gender and social class. [2]

If, indeed, we are educating children for citizenry in a pluralistic community, we need to ask ourselves what skills and knowledge base do they need for citizenship

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[2] Ibid., 2.

in our current society? How are our schools functioning as agents of socialization and social change? Why is it appropriate that any discussion around educational reform include issues of multiculturalism? Why is an issue so central to democracy, so politically charged that it is difficult to discuss?

Multicultural education is not a fad. It is a reality born of population growth in this country and the power of racial and cultural turmoil at the heart of our national identity. In a recent lecture at Teacher's College, James Banks offered four reasons to continue serious scholarly work in the area of multicultural education.[3] A quick look at the waves of debate and disagreement about the OJ Simpson trial and acquittal and the arguments around Affirmative Action reveal a nation in crisis over race. While 'the color line' in America has been drawn historically between white and black, racial issues between African-Americans and Hispanics are bubbling to the surface and are complicated as the economic classes are pried further and further apart. The depth and breadth of racial crisis in America is evident in the popular press and is reflected in the vociferous concern about how best to approach multicultural education in the nation's schools.

According to Banks, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by the year 2000 one out of three Americans will be a person of color and by the year 2050 fully 47% of the nation's population will be people of color. Add to that the growing gap between the rich and the poor and the shrinking of the middle class in America and it all adds up to fear (mostly white fear) about demographic changes. Part of the reason that multicultural education draws such heat in educational reform and has itself been marginalized by universities and schools of education, is that it provides a socially sanctioned forum to demonstrate the fear about the changing ethnic fabric

[3] The four points which follow were put forth in a lecture by James Banks at Teachers College, Columbia University, April 17, 1996.

of our country.

Thirdly, Banks contends that the dominant, mainstream culture is being forced to face the fact that the workplace will be diverse and colorful. Facing that reality means that white middle class American must face its own fear about loss of power in society. By the year 2000 83% of the new people in the work force will not be white males. Not only will the workplace necessarily change, but the power of the culture will need to be shared. People with cultural, economic and political power fear the change.

The logical culmination of Banks's first three points is his fourth -a vision. America, he asserts, is in the process of reshaping its national identity. Multicultural education is a large part of that process. Educators and educational reforms are examining our school systems and the hegemony which perpetuates racial and economic stratification. We are learning to rethink and re-vise or see again our history as a nation and in so doing we are looking again at our schools. What do we expect of schooling in our diverse society and how will we achieve it?

What are the Goals of Multicultural Education in our Schools?

As a body of theoretical and conceptual work on multicultural education solidifies, and schools and universities have begun to adopt and institutionalize the ideas of multicultural education, the goals have been clarified and refined.[4] Regardless of any given approach to multicultural work, most people in the field agree on the following goals - as stated by Banks (1994).

- increase educational equality for both gender groups, for students from diverse ethnic and cultural groups, and for exceptional students.

[4] Major thinkers in the field have produced scholarly work including Banks, 1973, 1988, 1994; Lynch, 1986; Modgil, Vermin, Mallick, and Modgil, 1986; Sleeter and Grant, 1988, Vera, 1989.

- help *all* students, including White mainstream students, to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function in and contribute to a pluralistic society.

- help *all* students to develop cross-cultural competencies in order to live harmoniously in a diverse global community.

All of these goals seem reasonable, hardly radical, but turning the theory into practice becomes immediately politicized. Schooling in this country is largely a socialization process and so educating a diverse student body immediately calls into question issues of cultural, linguistic and social codes. Achieving the goals of multicultural education, then, in different parts of the country, in different school settings presents very different dilemmas.

The issues in an urban school with large Hispanic, Asian, and/ or African-American student populations might revolve around the power politics between a colorful classroom and a white teacher. Lisa Delpit paints a statistical picture which suggests that while the number of nonwhite students increases, the number of teachers from nonwhite groups threatens to fall below 10 percent. [5] The Dean of Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1985 put it this way "Most teachers who teach today's children are white; tomorrow's teaching force will be even more so."[6] Such issues are complex and involve teacher education and cultural awareness as well as careful examination of teacher expectations for students of color. A wealthy suburban high school of mostly white students presents different issues. The power politic in those classrooms might concern the marginalization of the few students of color in the class or the difficulty of asking those students to represent the perspective of their entire race or ethnicity. They might feel silenced by the burden

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5 Delpit *Other People's Children Cultural Conflicts in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press),105.
6 P.A. Graham, "Black Teachers: A Drastically Scarce Resource," The Kappa 68,8 (1987) as quoted in Delpit, p. 105

of being a representative to the mostly white culture of the school.

Beyond the politics of the classroom, issues concerning curriculum, language diversity, teacher expectation, assessment practices, learning styles and resource availability all hover around any attempt to build a multicultural education for our nation's students. Diagram A hopes to illustrate the scope and pervasiveness of the issues. While it is impossible to isolate the issues from one another, it is also cumbersome to try to discuss all aspects of multicultural education at once. For the purposes of this paper we'll examine issues of content in curriculum and how the instructional theories of teachers are influenced and empowered by the politics of race, culture and power in the classroom setting. *What* texts should we teach to whom and *how* should we teach them?

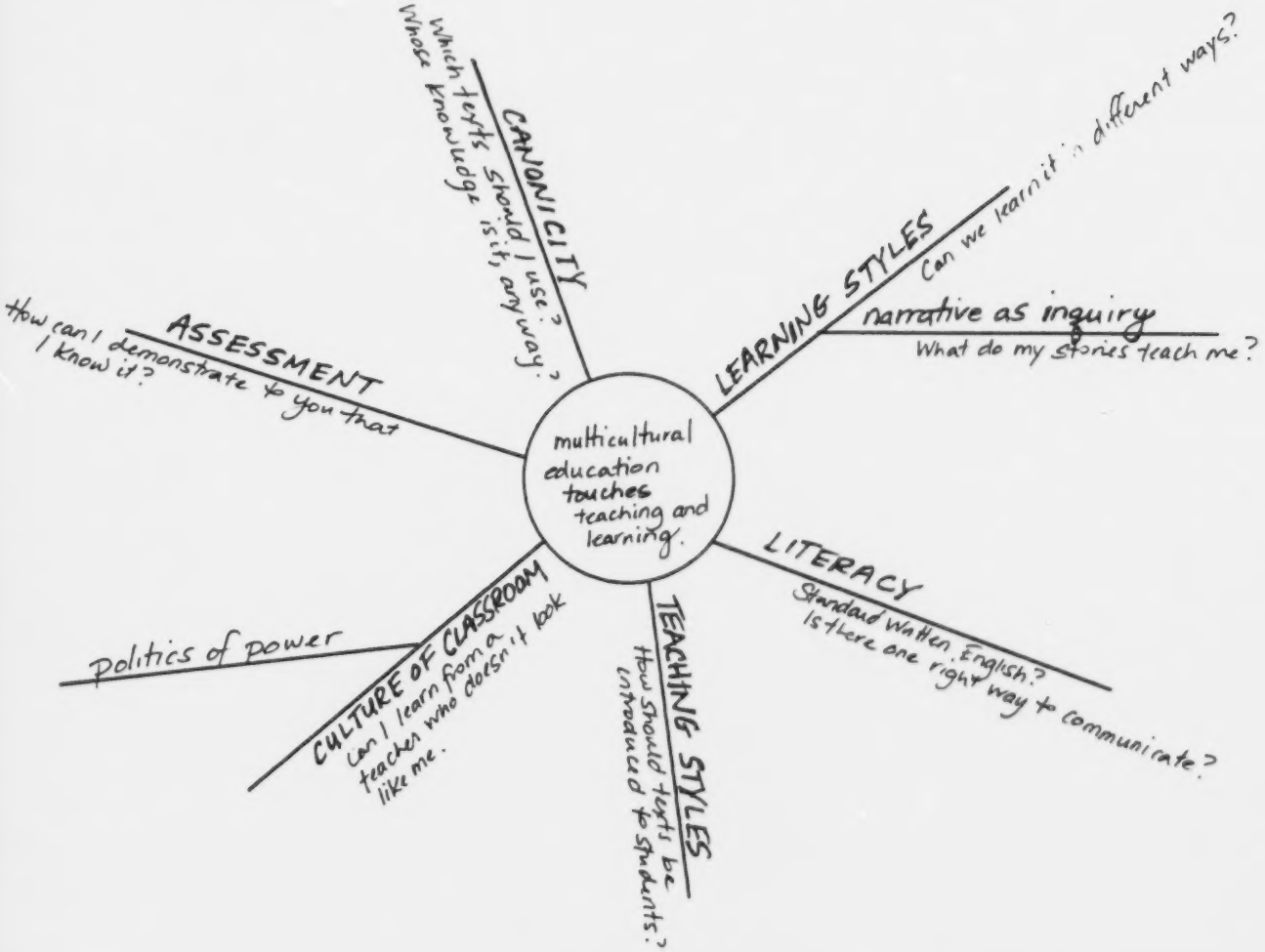
multicultural education touches teaching and learning.
CANONICITY
Which texts should I use?
Whose knowledge is it, anyway?
LEARNING STYLES
Can we learn it in different ways?
narrative as inquiry
What do my stories teach me?
ASSESSMENT
How can I demonstrate to you that I know it?
LITERACY
Standard Written English?
Is there one right way to communicate?
TEACHING STYLES
How should texts be introduced to students?
CULTURE OF CLASSROOM
Can I learn from a teacher who doesn't look like me.
Politics of power

Diagram A

The issues a multicultural education is likely to touch.

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Various Approaches to a Multicultural Curriculum.

Banks has condensed the various approaches to diversifying the content of current curriculums in schools. The aim is to include the various voices and multiple perspectives that comprise our nation's history. "Only a curriculum that reflects the experiences of a wide range of groups in the United States and the world, and the interests of these groups, is in the national interest and is consistent with the public good."[7] They range from minimal efforts to add voices to the existing traditional content to turning the classroom into a laboratory of democracy where students choose social issues to study and take community action to solve them. As Banks organizes the approaches they run from the simplest efforts to full scale curricular reform.

- Level 1: **Contributions Approach**
  Focus on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements.
- Level 2: **Additive Approach**
  Content, concepts, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum without changing its structure.
- Level 3: **The Transformation Approach**
  The structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.
- Level 4: **The Social Action Approach**
  Students make decisions on social issues and take actions to help solve them.

[taken from Banks, *Introduction to Multicultural Education*, 1994, p 25.]

Each stage has different perils in implementation and the setting of the school and the classroom community changes the nature of the dangers. It is not until a school

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[7] Banks, 23.

reaches Level 3 that they are institutionalizing the goals of a multicultural education.

Ultimately, Banks believes that multiculturalism is more *a way of thinking* than it is lists of material or lists of cultures 'to cover.' "It's a way of asking questions, a way of conceptualizing."[8] Students need to know that knowledge is socially constructed and what is taught, typically, in school is the result of decisions made by powerful people -educators, politicians, and publishers - not by some absolute authority. Banks advocates that "We should teach students that knowledge is a social construction, that it reflects the perspective, experiences, and values of the people and cultures that construct it and that it is dynamic, changing and debated among knowledge creators and users."[9] If the curriculum embraces this notion it can more easily include multiple voices and perspectives.

Students need not learn separately about the Asian, the Jewish, the African, the Hispanic experience, the rich, the poor, the male, the female, the childhood experience in America, but students can explore a concept or an event in history from various ways of seeing. Students should be encouraged to interrogate texts. They should read to look through multiple perspectives as they make sense of the material; they should ask themselves to examine the stories from various vantage points. W.C. Booth has written that every student ought to come to respect the powers of at least two contrasting ways of looking at or grasping whatever work is being studied. he know that only when alternative possibilities come alive "are we driven beyond imitation into thought."[10] In their searching, with the teacher as a guide, students will create their own understanding of that moment in time, and

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8 Banks, 88.

9 Ibid., 5.

10 W.C. Booth *The Company we keep: An ethics of fiction.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 337.

understand that there are different ways of knowing it.

bell hooks sees a move toward multicultural education as a challenge to teachers "to recognize the narrow boundaries that have shaped the way knowledge is shared in the classroom." We need to examine not only the texts we use, but how we teach them and how various voices are heard in the communities of our classrooms. hooks says that multiculturalism "forces us all to recognize our complicity in accepting and perpetuating biases of any kind. Students are eager to break through barriers to knowing. They are willing to surrender to the wonder of re-learning and learning ways of knowing that go against the grain. When we as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world...we can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberatory...education." [11] Multicultural education, in all its various stages and settings, needs to challenge our very ways of seeing and knowing the world. In an increasingly diverse culture and a growing global population, we must learn how to communicate across difference so that we might see and know another person's point of view.

Maxine Greene sees the issues around multiculturalism in education as a redefining of the conflict which shaped our nation - namely the creative and energized conflict between individualism and the need for a strong social community. She writes, "Multiculturalism sharpens the dilemma in many ways, once the distinctiveness and passion of multiple voices are attended to, and once the need for conformity or, at least, common agreement becomes urgent. The community we are seeking, however, ought not to be identified with conformity."[12] Through understanding differences, through learning to look, learn and know our

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11 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge), 44.

12 Maxine Greene, "Multiculturalism, Community, and the Arts" in *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classroom and Community* (Illinois, NCTE, 1994), 21.

own cultural identities we can envision and create community in the spirit of Dewey's sense of 'doing democracy.' We need to actively, thoughtfully create community in our classrooms and in our schools and encourage students to practice the process of creating culture and valuing difference.

II. How do we see, know, and create the world?

> **It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.**
>
> **John Berger, *Ways of Seeing***

The room was stuffy and suddenly silent. My tongue was dry and swollen and seemed stuck behind my teeth. I waited and wondered when I'd be released. The interview committee consisted of six people around an oval table asking me questions about my teaching experiences and watching me. I felt their eyes. I wondered what they thought they knew of me from what they saw.

"You've talked a lot about your teaching life." He paused and studied the transcripts on the table in front of him. "You've studied for a lot of years," he said punching the official papers with his index finger. "In all that schooling what was your most powerful intellectual experience?" I didn't have to search for an answer. My mind took me instantly to a classroom in Vermont and a discussion of Chekov's play, *The Seagull.* It was August and the final of five summers of reading and writing about literature. I had chosen an acting class as a reward for the hard work I felt I'd done in the rigorous pursuit of literary criticism and composition theory. I thought acting would be less demanding and more fun.

*****

I had read *The Seagull* and studied my part, but I was not at all prepared for the epiphany which occurred in the stale heat of that classroom. The professor asked me simple questions. "What does Trigorin want in this scene?" I answered with ease and confidence. I offered a reasonable explanation and supported it with several specific references to previous scenes in the play. My professor smiled patiently. "But what does he want?" she asked again. I flipped, a little frantic, through my notes and found more evidence from the text. My professor pushed again. "But what does he really want to do in life? More than anything else, what does he wish he could do?" I grew frustrated and felt anger stir in my stomach and float into a warmth in my face. Was she questioning my ability to read the play? I had provided and substantiated an interpretation. Why was she insisting on another reading? Unfortunately I can't recall *how* she encouraged me to move from my academic, carefully grounded literary view. Through her persistent questioning and enthusiasm about acting, she invited me to leave my seat as a critical reader and step into the character of Trigorin as I might walk in his shoes on stage. She asked me to see with an actor's eyes, and the play was transformed.

Once I stood in his part, walked in his shoes and considered the constructed, fictive reality of a stage peopled by Chekhov, I could see clearly that Trigorin wanted. *I wanted to fish.* I was a professional writer. I suffered to see the world as a writer sees. I was compelled to write what I saw. Visions tormented me until I could release my struggles with words. I wanted many things, but I saw, quite suddenly, that I wished to be blind to the paradox and pain a writer sees in the world. I wanted to fish; I wanted to be content. I was he -Trigorin.

My literary answers were carefully supported by the text, and they were solid interpretations of the character, but my professor was right, too. Trigorin never

actually said that he wanted to fish, but my professor had tapped into the engine of his most basic human desire. When I read Trigorin's part as an actor might read, I discovered Trigorin as a human being with palpable human desires. The play bloomed before me, inflated a world that had been flat on the literary page until I read myself into his character and saw his world with his eyes.

I walked out of that class reeling. After five summers of reading and writing about literature, I had learned, again, *how* to read. With an actor's eyes, the world of literature was transformed. There was a whole new set of questions to ask and the text, now a script, demanded different energy from me as a reader.

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I sat back and relaxed in the chair. I'd been lost in my own storytelling. I'd discovered and reinvented the power of that moment of learning in the process of telling the story to the interview committee. Since then I have retold the story of my most powerful intellectual experience many times, and its narrative continually inspires inquiry and reflection.

*****

Narrative as a form of inquiry has received, recently, considerable attention from many types of thinkers. Literary theory has, of course, always considered the power of narrative to make meaning, but recently, the growth of the reader-response movement and an emphasis on teaching writing as a process rather than a prescript has energized the field. The reader-response movement encourages readers to join writers in the act of creating meaning. Through its thinking readers

have been empowered to make meaning from text by weaving the narratives of their own lives into their reading of the text. Narrative as a valid and valuable form of inquiry and method of both research and instruction has invited new ways of shaping meaning and constructing knowledge. Psychologists and social scientists are in dialogue with literary theorists about seeing narrative as a socially constructed, discursive practice of making meaning. There is growing recognition in education discourse, from the philosophers and cognitive scientists to the practitioners, that "narratives are the means by which we gradually impart meaning to the events in our lives."[13] But the moment one recognizes story telling as a valid mode of inquiry, the shape, size and wrapping of the story becomes as meaningful as its insides or what we typically call the plot or events of the story. While this chorus is, in some sense, an echo of oral tradition in other cultures, Roland Barthes is usually given credit for igniting this modern, theoretical dialogue in the Western world. He emphasizes the importance of discovering meaning through the telling of story when he says,

> The function of narrative is not to 'represent' it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us....Narrative does not show, does not imitate; rather it *is* the meaning; "what happens" is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming.[14]

The conversation about narrative is further complicated by needing to examine not only the *what* of the story, the *how* of the story telling (the adventure of the language), but also the *how* of the reading process (the transmitting and creating of the adventure with the reader).

Jerome Bruner reminds us that the telling of the story is an active process of

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[13] Greene "Multiculturalism, Community and the Arts" in *The Need for Story* (Illinois: NCTE 1994), 14

[14] Barthes, "Introduction to the Structuralist Analysis of Narratives," in *Image, Music Text*, 123- 124.

inquiry. In fact, a constructivist view of story telling might argue that stories do not happen in the real world but are constructed in people's minds. Or as Henry James once put it "stories happen to people who know how to tell them."[15] Telling the story of my most powerful intellectual moment reinvents its meaning for me. I'll tell it with slight variation each time it surfaces. I'll take another look at its meaning for me as it reveals itself to me through language. The essence of the story is steady, stable, and asks me to revisit, and re-vise or re-see my personal theories about teaching and learning. The telling of the story will invite me to think about how I make meaning from experience, how I learn.

Annie Dillard, in her book *Living By Fiction* sees great minds from various fields focusing on what it means to learn. For literary theorists, psychologists, social scientists, physicists, and especially educational philosophers the question becomes, at some point, how do we *know* the world?

> Any penetrating interest in anything ultimately leads to what used to be called epistemology. If you undertake the least mental task - if you so much as try to classify a fern- you end up agog in the lap of Kant. For in order to know anything for certain, we must first examine the mind's own way of knowing. And how on earth do we propose to do that? [16]

How does one learn to look? How does one create a structure, space, or scaffolding to help students see what they could not see before? How does one encourage students to examine again what they thought they knew? To travel to places -real and imagined- they've never been, to see the world from another's perspective, through another cultural lens, with another pair of eyes, another pair of ears that can listen through another language and to be able, then, to pull that

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15 Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative" in *The Need for Story* (Illinois: NCTE, 1994), 28.
16 Annie Dillard *Living by Fiction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 53.

exposure and experience into the warp and weave of one's own narrative - to make it a part of one's own world - that is what it is *to learn*. It is possible to have traveled all over the world and not be 'well-traveled; it is possible to read a lot and not carry the wisdom of being well-read. What we *make* of our experiences, not the experiences themselves, is the essence of learning.

Vygotsky's work has stretched linguists and learners to understand that we use words to construct meaning as we might use hand held tools to construct a house. Words help us to define conceptual frames on which we can hang and rearrange various meanings. Vygotsky encourages reflection (a process implicit in narration) as a mode of inquiry because "learning to direct one's own mental processes with the aid of words or signs is an integral part of the process of concept formation."[17] The process by which language forms and shapes our ways of knowing (our conceptual frames) is discussed later in the paper, but it is critical to understand that language is one of the most powerful tools by which we construct an understanding of the world. Individual understandings are in constant negotiation with other understandings. Whether two people converse or several cultures converse and create community in a school, conceptual frameworks will clash and language is the currency of the negotiation. The product - a shared meaning, an understanding, a common thought - is slippery and elusive for "our knowledge is contextual and only contextual. Ordering and invention coincide: we call their collaboration 'knowledge.' The mind is a blues guitar on which we improvise the song of the world." [18] As world views, cultural lenses and languages collide, there is opportunity for creating new spaces, for negotiating differences and composing new songs for the world.

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[17] Vygotsky *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1986), 108.
[18] Dillard, 56.

Where does teaching and fiction fit into all this? A story will offer some clarity and the reflection involved in creating the narrative will raise some questions. With careful thought I designed an American Literature course that sought to include the variety of voice and experience in the history of the United States. The course was driven by two essential questions.

The first asked, simply, for a definition. What does it mean to be an American, to be a citizen of the United States? I hoped that we would struggle with how we, as a nation and as individuals within a pluralistic democracy, learn to define ourselves as both American and as "other." To be American means, in some sense, to be from another country, culture and heritage. To what extent does the dynamic of constructing an American identity rely on being able to compare yourself against what you know you are not?

The second question, "What makes a classic piece of literature revered as 'a classic?'" directed attention to the nature and focus of power in American society. How does what we read in classrooms shape our conception of what it is to be a citizen of the United States.

I want my students to examine why we read what we read in classrooms, and to hear the silences of the stories we do not read. I had hoped the essential questions would demand of students that they examine the structures of knowledge and power in American society by considering the canon of American Literature as a social, political, and economic construction of literary representation.

At the most fundamental level I want students to use the power of literature to gain access to people and cultures they might not experience in their daily living. I believe that the world's literature can build bridges which will allow people to travel and explore other cultures. To see and know other worlds. Literature provides a voice that lets us know that other people often feel, fear, and fumble with

the same issues that we face privately. A good piece of literature invites us to take part in a familiar story, a human story, and to recognize that story as our own. We are drawn to ourselves in it and at the same time are asked to stretch to understand something new about a different culture, an unfamiliar person, a foreign place, a slightly different angle on the world. Literature from around the world provides exposure to different cultures, social struggles, and ways of life, and so asks us to see ourselves as a single voice within a colorful chorus.

It is not enough, however, to be, simply, exposed to a diversity of cultures and multiple ways of seeing the world. Exposure is not a method of instruction. To see is now to know. In fact, exposure, without attention to its purpose, can be a form of voyeurism, a type of oppression, a distinguishing of 'other' as different, as distant.

Consider the urban dweller who visits the tropics each spring, and sees the island only in the context of a long coveted sojourn. Jamaica Kincaid illuminates such ways of seeing in the opening of her novel *A Small Place.*

> If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see. If you come by aeroplane, you will land at the V.C. Bird International Airport. Vere Cornwall (V.C.) Bird is the Prime Minister of Antigua. You may be the sort of tourist who would wonder why a Prime Minister would want an airport named after him- why not a school, why not a hospital, why not some great public monument? You are a tourist and you have not yet seen a school in Antigua, you have not yet seen a hospital in Antigua, you have not yet seen a public monument in Antigua. As your plane descends to land, you might, say, What a beautiful island Antigua is- more beautiful than any of the other islands you have seen and they were very beautiful in their way, but they were much too green, much too lush with vegetation, which indicated to you, the tourist, that they got quite a bit of rainfall, and rain is the very thing that you, just now, do not want, for you are thinking of the hard and cold and dark and long days you spent working in North America (or worse, Europe), earning some money so that you could stay in this place (Antigua) where the sun always shines and where the climate is deliciously hot and dry for the four to ten days you are going to be staying there; and since you are on your holiday, since you are a tourist, the thought of what it might be like for someone who had to live day in, day out in a place that suffers constantly from drought, and so has to watch carefully every drop of fresh water used...must never cross your mind.

We can travel, as weary cosmopolitan workers in search of sunshine and solitude to

Antigua, and see in it only what we want to see. It is not enough to simply invite the tourists to see the hospital or the school. Why would they go? There is no reason to go given the purpose of their travel. Jamaica Kincaid points at us, her readers, and tells us to examine our point of view and how it might color the Antigua we will see. By pointing out the frame, she asks us to interrogate our way of seeing. Tourists, those of us visiting other cultures, even as readers of texts, must understand that our own perspective, the reasons for our visit, frames the scope and composition of the pictures we will take home. If we do not challenge the way that we see, we'll see only what we knew before we looked.

The challenge in the classroom is to do more than simply read stories from all over the world. The power of literature lies in its ability to open the world to us and to help us find our place in it, but its capacities are only as potent as the creative imagination of the reader. The reader's journey and understanding of the imaginary spaces of literature is as much dependent on the reader's act of reading as it is on the text itself. It is not enough to simply broaden our exposure and introduce readers to something new. Teachers need to examine the very ways in which we read, and encourage students to *read in new* and *multiple ways* in order to be open to the unique demands a narrative and a story might place on us as readers.

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III. A Story from A Classroom. Reading The Bluest Eye.

> It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights- ise eyes of her were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.
>
> -Toni Morrison *The Bluest Eye*

> Teaching andlearning must be linked to the goal of educating students to take risks, to struggle with on-going relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside of their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world which is 'not-yet' - in order to be able to alter the grounds own which life is lived.
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> -Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo
> *Literacy Reading the Word and the World.*

In my fifth or sixth year of teaching, we began an American Literature course by reading creation stories from Native Americans, from Dutch Europeans and from various African cultures. We discussed how the stories might inform the different cultures' ways of viewing and understanding the world and how that understanding might shape and inform the defining of America. We read some short personal stories from contemporary Americans and tried to trace the meaning of individual story to a culture's creation story in order to set the stage for the pivotal role of personal story in creating and sustaining culture.

By mid October we were knee-deep into Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter.* I had set the students to read it for its issues of identity and to examine how Hester Prynne 's identity is shaped by a dynamic of her perceptions of herself as an adulterer, a mother of an impish child, a woman ostracized by her behavior *and* a woman who knows the authenticity of her love in the face of the community's condemnation of it. We read it as an 18th century novel and discussed the creation of Hester's identity within a dialectic dependent on both her relationship to the

community's understanding of her as 'other' and her sense of self as an independent human being. That dialect, the negotiation between how we define ourselves in the context of and reaction to our community's perception and understanding of us, creates the energy and atmosphere in which we learn to define ourselves as unique human beings.[19] While we certainly discussed the novel's history and contribution to building an American literary tradition, we focused our discussion on Hester's struggle to carve out an identity against a community which needed, in order to define itself, to see her as 'other.'

From *The Scarlet Letter* we moved to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye.* It was my hope to walk into this novel carrying new knowledge about identities. The students would have already had some practice recognizing, articulating and using issues of identity formation to inform their reading. The intention of the design was to create openings in the text for students who might see no external connection to Pecola, a poor, black child living in the American South in the 1940s. I hoped to facilitate my student's ability to identify with Pecola's struggles to know and understand herself in the context of her own world, a world light years away from the wealth and privilege of a New England prep school. I hoped to examine Pecola Breedlove as another young woman who, like Hester Prynne is ostracized and victimized by society. Pecola, however, is singled out and identified as 'other' by the color of her skin and by her family's behavior - neither are matters over which she had any control. By focusing on the formation of identity, I hoped to push through the details of the context, the 'situatedness' of the story in a particular place and time in history, and reveal the universal issues at work as an individual creates and recreates identity within a society. I hoped my students would be able to look through the differences and acknowledge the universal human struggle to

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[19] Jennifer Gore The *Struggle for Pedagogies* (Routledge, New York 1990)

distinguish 'self.' bell hooks believes that, "identity politics emerge out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle."[20] I hoped my students would see a part of themselves in Pecola and see that a person's identity is in constant negotiation between its own concept of self and the signals the self receives from the ways in which the community perceives it.

Identity formation is the essence of adolescence, and many students in my classroom were visibly at work creating themselves in the spaces between their internal conceptions of themselves and the public persona they carried into the classroom. Many were straining to distinguish themselves from what teachers, parents and peers thought they were or wanted them to be. Many were internalizing the signal they received about themselves from the people around them. Using the journeys of Hester and Pecola, I hoped to create a space for my students to use their own stories and the two literary narratives to weave their reading and their own experiences into an understanding of the making of a fabric called 'self.' The power and potential of narrative as inquiry is "to particularize experience and to enlarge as well as personalize issues."[21]

Through an exploration of how individuals form identity, I sought to introduce students to a variety of cultures and people and worlds. I hoped to do it in a way that goes beyond what Banks call an "additive approach" to multicultural education. I wanted Pecola in my classroom because of what she had to teach us about the human struggle to define oneself. I hoped to do it in a way which would embrace Edward Said's notion of 'worldliness.'

> By linking works to each other we bring them out of the neglect and secondariness to which for all kinds of political

[20] bell hooks, 88.

[21] Diane Brunner *Inquiry and Reflection: Framing Narrative Practice in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

> and ideological reasons they ha[ve] been previously condemned. Worldliness is therefore the restoration to such works and interpretations of their place in the global setting, a restoration that can only be accomplished by an appreciation not of some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world but of the large, many-windowed house of human cultures as a whole.[22]

My lofty notions of bridging cultures through stories of universal human experience were immediately challenged by my students. When I distributed *The Bluest Eye* in class there was much groaning and the students asked me if it would be as difficult to read as Hawthorne had been. I smiled and thought of the brilliant descriptions and graphic, poetic prose of Morrison's first novel. "No," I said. "I think you'll find the language easy to read; I'm not sure, though, that the story is easy to digest." I was thinking of Morrison's subtle examination of racism in our society and how it affects the dreams and ambitions of individual people. The brilliance of her book is the insightful description of how racism eats at the health and stamina of an individual's perception of self.

Morrison encourages us, in the opening of the novel, to focus on studying *how* relationships happen. "There is really nothing more to say -except *why*. But since *why* is difficult to handle one must take refuge in how."[23] Her advice guided my efforts to teach the novel and echoes in my reflections on the conversations in my classroom. When reading texts from various cultures, I want students to value texts equally in Said's sense of worldliness. I kept 'worldliness' as a curricular goal and focused my efforts in the classroom dialogue on how to achieve that level of understanding, appreciation and empathy across difference.

The subtlety of the distinction I had made in my initial comment about *The*

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22 Edward Said, "The Politics of Knowledge" in *Race Identity and Representation in Education* McCarthy, Cameron ed. (Routledge: New York 1993), 312.

23 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Washington Square Press, New York 1970), 9.

Bluest Eye had stuck in the students' minds. They had already flipped the small paperback in their hands and had read the back cover. They knew it was the story of a young black girl who longed for blue eyes so that someone might notice her presence. The back of the book reads, "When someone finally did [notice her], it was her father, drunk. He raped her. Soon she would bear his child." Before I had handed a book to every student in the room, students launched questions. They whispered nervously to one another. They giggled and groaned. They wanted to know why this book? I felt my face grow hot, and decided to ignore the commotion. Why hadn't they asked me to justify the choice of *The Scarlet Letter?*, I wondered. Clearly they had already identified this book as 'different' as 'other.' I wondered how that initial reaction might affect their reading of it. I wanted Pecola's story to speak for itself, so I pushed the students into the first activity with the book.

I asked them to read the first paragraph out loud to one another in groups. Their work was to construct a list of adjectives to describe the family they had read about. My plan was to let them identify the family of Dick and Jane as a white, middle-class, suburban family. I planned to ask them, then, to speculate about Morrison's reasons for structuring the book by titling each chapter with a piece of the "Dick and Jane" story. Why might she want to juxtapose the story of "Dick and Jane" with the story of Pecola Breedlove? I had grand plans for a vital discussion about the assumption white people make about 'white' being the 'norm' and all other races existing as 'marked' or 'other.'

When I asked them to describe the family of Dick and Jane, they described themselves. The discussion that I had hoped to direct was predicated on recognizing and calling that family white. Dutifully I wrote their adjectives on the board, waiting for one of the fifteen students in the room to identify the family (and themselves) as white. No one did. I was lost. If I made the distinction *for* them

they'd see it as contrived, as one of Ms. Knopp's 'issues,' as politics not as fact. Silently I played with the chalk in the palm of my hand and studied my feet. They grew silent, too, and a little sullen. I waited. The chalk softened in my sweaty hand as I wondered what to do. I hesitated to step into the space between the readers and text, the space that was both empty of voice and interpretation and full of possibility for meaning. If I walked into that space as the authority, as the teacher, as the person with power, the space and its possibilities would disappear.

In her book *Inquiry and Reflection: Framing Narrative Practice in Education* Diane Brunner writes a chapter about the power and politics in the spaces of classrooms. She investigates the space between students, between teacher and students, and among teacher, student and texts, and suggests that valuing students' voices requires more than arranging the desks in circles and asking students to write from their own experiences. Brunner encourages us to create and be comfortable with silence in our conversations. This "space for thinking, reflecting, deferring may be critical in the sense that at the very juncture where uncertainty lies, space may have been created for forging new meanings, practices, alternative ways of being in the world."[24] The silence is important for the students, but it offers a bookmark in the teacher's examination of her teaching practices, too. Ruth Vinz reflecting on her own teaching experiences, says that the moments of silence in a classroom "offer within it seeds that suggest future practices or habits of reflection."[25]

I waited on the edge of the silence and the space for a full two minutes, considering. When I did walk into it, we'd have to play a game called "guess what the teacher is thinking," and students would guess at what I might want them to

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24 Brunner, 154.

25 Ruth Vinz *Composing a Teaching Life* (Portsmouth NH: Boyton/Cook 1996), 129.

say. I sat on my desk and sidestepped the obvious opportunity to pontificate by offering to tell them a story. The pencils fell on notebooks and they turned their faces toward mine.

Another story, I thought, a different story might lead them to read Pecola's story with different eyes. It might help them to repositioning themselves to Morrison's text and see in it multiple meanings. I wanted to illustrate that the nature of privilege allows race and gender to be invisible. I wanted them to know that they didn't see themselves as white because society does not mark them as white. "Race, like the concept of gender, all too often has been used as a synonym for groups and persons who have been positioned as racially subordinate."[26] I told them about meeting a man named Michael Kimmel who is a professor of Men's Studies at Harvard. I told them a story he had shared with group of students at another school. "When a black woman looks in the mirror," I said "she sees a black woman. When a white woman looks in the mirror, she sees a woman." I paused and wondered what I wanted them to understand. "And when a white man looks in the mirror, he sees a human being." I waited again and let them think. I wanted my students to understand the basic idea that race and gender are important and significant parts of *any* socially constructed identity, even if the race is white and the gender is male. I wanted them to read the text of their own identities with eyes that let them see race, class, and gender as a continual negotiation of power. I wanted them to be cognizant of the multiplicity of their own identities and the possibility those various selves offered the text.

I asked them to describe what they saw when they looked in the mirror, and they seemed to understand that their whiteness was invisible to them, but the

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26 Leslie G. Roman, "White is a Color!" in *Race Identity and Representation in Education*, McCarthy and Crichlow eds. (Routledge: New York 1993), 71.

power of its invisibility wasn't startling to them. I wasn't sure what my story had offered them, but it seemed a softer way to ask them to recognize 'white' as a race.

I used the same opening exercise with another group of students. This second section consisted of seven white, two African-American, and two Hispanic students. They, too had read the back of the book before I offered an introduction, but there were no comments. As they described the Dick and Jane family, the African-American students put "white" at the top of their list. I was relieved, and pleased to hear the quality of the discussion as it proceeded. The white students in this section were willing to admit that the adjective "white" had not occurred to them and were curious about why they had not seen it as one of the most general descriptors of the family. There was no need for another story about mirrors and identity in this group. I stepped out of the conversation and let the students create spaces for imagining the world among themselves. In this section, because of its diversity in color and life experience, the conversation about Morrison's reasons for using the Dick and Jane story as a 'countertext' was vibrant and full of inquiry.

As we read the novel, I was surprised by the ways in which the two sections constructed different understandings of the text. Several spots in the story revealed their understandings of race and their struggles to let the text open new worlds for them. I was anxious to hear how they were making meaning, so I structured class time to let small groups grapple with sections of the text. I was free, then, simply to listen and watch the students struggle to construct a way of seeing and knowing Pecola's world.

I was troubled by the number of times the students collectively reconstructed meaning which used the text to reinforce their sometimes simplistic understanding of race and power in society. As they talked in small groups, I was alarmed by how easily they could make the story of a little black girl's victimization feed their own

idea of what it is to be black and poor. They acted, at times, as if they expected nothing more for her. I worried that they didn't respect her enough to learn from her. Gail Robinson, in her book *Cross Cultural Understanding* suggests that respect is a prerequisite to being able to see another's point of view. "If the study of another culture is to lead the learner to another cultural perspective, it is critical that the new perspective be considered valuable and worthy of learning. Depending upon the culture of study, developing cultural understanding may imply that students are to become perceptually versatile."[27]

I needed to create a space for possibility between students who seemed reluctant to leave their familiar landscapes in order to experience Pecola's story. I needed to open a new kind of dialogue which might kindle new ways of reading. I didn't know how I would do it, but the ache in my belly told me that something needed to change. What I didn't know then was that I needed to reposition my teaching self; I needed to challenge myself to see the text of my own teaching differently.

The daily work of school pressed on. I asked a group of two boys and a girl, all white, to describe an incident in the narrative which involved three black girls on the playground. In order to understand the students' understanding and my need to challenge their meaning, it's important to read the scene and experience the language Morrison uses to pry open its racial complexities.

Pecola Breedlove, is a "case." That is, according to our child narrator, Claudia, "a girl who had no place to go." She's been befriended by Claudia and her older sister Frieda because their family has agreed to look after her until her father is released from jail. Her skin is deep, dark black and she considers herself ugly. In this scene she is being teased and tormented by a group of boys on the playground.

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[27] Gail Robinson, *Cross cultural Understanding* (New York: Prentice Hall 1988), 21.

> They seemed to have taken all of their cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds - cooled- and spilled over lips of outrage, consume whatever was in it path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit. (55)

Frieda steps into the scene to try to break up the taunting and protect Pecola. The boys stop to consider her request but challenge her and threaten to pull her into the circle and tease and torment her as well. When Maureen Peal, a new girl at school, arrives and stands next to Frieda and Claudia, the boys disband.

> Maureen appeared at my elbow, and the boys seemed reluctant to continue under her springtime eyes so wide with interest. They buckled in confusion, not willing to beat up three girls under her watchful gaze. (56)

The four girls are cemented by their escape and Maureen offers to buy Pecola an ice cream to soothe her wounded feelings. As they walk down the street, all four girls together, Maureen asks Pecola questions about her daddy. Claudia senses that the questioning is another attack on Pecola. In an effort to protect her, Claudia steps in.

> "You stop talking about her daddy," I said.
> "What do I care about her old black daddy?" Maureen asked.
> "Black? Who you calling black?"
> "You!"
> "You think you're so cute?!" I swung at her and missed...
> Safe on the other side (of the street) she screamed at us. " I am cute!
> And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. (66)

I asked a small group of my students to reconstruct the scene, respond to it and offer their interpretation to the class. As I listened to them describe what they had read, and watched them take the time to pour through the text again as a group, I was troubled by their conclusions. Various voices tried to make sense of the scene.

> "I don't get it. Why are they fighting?"
> "One is saying that the other slept with her Dad."
> "No. Where do you get that?"
> "No. I swear."
> "Why is she mad about being called Black?"

"Yea. Isn't she black?"
"What's the big deal?"
"Does Claudia know that Pecola slept with her Dad?"
"Why does she call her black and ugly? That's mean."

Collectively they spun a distortion of the scene to fit their own notion of what was happening between those girls. Morrison's delicate detail had revealed to them the subtleties of a story about four girls protecting themselves from 'other', in this case the boys, and fighting to establish a ranking among themselves. The scene is a specific examination of race relations between and among blacks. My students couldn't hear the brilliance of Morrison's storytelling, they weren't hearing the delicacy of her tones. I had thought that this scene would be an easy way into this discussion, but my students seemed unable to see the structures and rules of Pecola's world.

I wondered if their deafness to Morrison's detail was linked to their inability to name and mark themselves as white. Without a fundamental understanding of their own racial identity, perhaps, their first impression of Pecola and her family dictated a more complete understanding of her. They seemed to see only what they expected her to be. Robinson's studies, highlighted in her book Cross Cultural Understanding concludes that "Once impressions are formed, and a frame of reference is established, evaluations are difficult to change. People have a tendency for consistency." [28]

I felt that I needed to guide their reading. To be silent in the face of their pre - judging felt complicitous. It felt unethical, but I wanted to respect and reflect on the palpable space between cultures in my classroom at that moment. If I stepped in and

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28 Robinson, 62. In the studies on reducing prejudice in young children it has been found that the more interaction with an 'outgroup' complicated the 'ingroup' perception and shatters harmful stereotypes. Banks reviews the research on classroom activities to reduce prejudice in his book *Introduction to Multicultural Education*.

told them *how* to read the scene, they'd lose the opportunity to construct their own reading of it. Conversely, I needed to teach them to substantiate their interpretations with evidence from the text. They needed to learn the skills of responsible literary interpretation. How could I make the spaces in my classroom between me and the students, among students, and between the students and the text spark a dialogue? Friere reminds us that dialogue is not an "empty instructional tactic."[29] It is a vehicle to carry us to thoughtful understanding. I wanted to highlight the necessity of examining their own reading of the scene, and use that reflection as instruction. I needed to understand how they were entering the text before I could encourage them to use a different doorway.

"Wait a minute," I said, finally, thinking that I ought to be cautious of shutting down their thinking with the concern in my voice. "What color is Maureen Peal?" I asked. They were stunned by the simplicity of the question. "White" one girl said, and then as she searched my face, "Isn't she?" I looked at the other three students. They all agreed. White. "Are you sure the text supports that?" I asked. They flipped through pages and found a clear description of Maureen several pages before the incident on the playground.

> **A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided in two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of white girls, swaddled in comfort and care. (52)**

How had they used this information to understand that Maureen was white? Had they simply skimmed the text and missed the use of white as a comparison rather than an identifying factor? Had they used assumptions about class, that to be 'rich' means to be white, to inform their understanding? How were they making sense of the story? What assumptions about race came from the foundations of their white

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29 Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* in Critical Studies in Education Series (MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, Inc.) 1987.

privilege? How much of themselves were they pouring into the prose? The only way to know seemed to be through persistent reflection about the way we were reading in the classroom.

I wanted them to negotiate, navigate the space between the activity of their reading and the dynamics of the text at the moment of meaning making. How was Morrison's language, her careful use of metaphor and the syntax of her descriptions being digested? Wolfgang Iser, a theorist in the reader-response model, discusses a reading process which helped me think about what was happening in my classroom.

> The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts *as a kind of mirror;* but at the same time, the reality which this process helps to create is one that will be different from his own (since normally, we tend to be bored by text that present us with things we already know perfectly well ourselves.)[30]

If the students in my classroom were using Morrison's text as a way to look at themselves, what did they see? Who, in that playground scene did they most easily identify with and was that identification a function of outward appearance or of how closely they could identify with the character's feelings? Questions imploded. I had to revisit my agenda as teacher in that classroom.

I wanted my students to use the text "as a kind of mirror" but not a mirror that would recreate the characters in the image of the reader -which seemed to be happening as they 'rewrote' scenes in the reading process, but to use the mirror to see themselves through Pecola's eyes and to see themselves in Pecola. I wanted them to be able to leave enough of themselves to be able to travel to the landscapes of Pecola's world and experience it as both foreign and familiar. The very ways in

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30 I don't know!!

which students were using her words to negotiate the journey from their own world to Pecola's could be instructive to them. Again, Iser offers a possible reading process.

> Thus we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own. The impact this reality makes on him will depend largely on the extent to which he himself actively provides the unwritten part of the extent and yet in supplying all the missing links he must think in terms of experiences different from his own; indeed it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience that the reader can truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers him.[31]

Once the students in the all white section understood that the scene was not about a white girl calling a black girl black, they had to decipher the text with alternate strategies and reconstruct a way of understanding the racial politics of the insult. They had many questions and couldn't understand why Claudia and Frieda were "stunned" by the "weight of the remark" from Maureen.[32]

Again I stood at the edge of a tenuous space. If I stepped in to explain the power of prejudice amongst blacks and actively teach them about the hierarchies between shades of color, I'd be in the powerful role as a white woman, as a teacher, explaining the intricacies of discrimination I have never and will never suffer. I waited for the silence to generate some direction for me, but it did not. I felt I had no choice, but to step in.

I stood at the board, drew diagrams, and explained the theories of how power filters through shades of black skin. I used referential power by naming social scientists and literary scholars whose life work has been a deconstructing of power relations in society. I wrote names like Edward Said, bell hooks, Michael Kimmel, Peggy McIntosh, Audre Lorde, Ronald Takaki, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to

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31 Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" in *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism* ed. Jane P. Tompkins, (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 51.

32 Morrison1979, 61.

demonstrate that thinkers and scholars from many disciplines where studying how race, class and gender moves through power relations in culture. Despite my attempts to legitimize my diagrams, (albeit with names that meant nothing to them) the students did not trust my knowledge. They saw a white teacher at the front of the room telling them how they ought to perceive prejudice among African-Americans. Why should they think that I might know? I was at once the authority in the room and powerless to know. I had no stories to tell. I needed Morrison's help. Morrison's skill with language and imagination had created a world which my students might enter. Her literary landscape, in its careful crafting would, I believed, provide my students with some experience that the chalk marks on the board could never hope to provide. The power of literature in this moment was to carry us into an understanding which we could not collect, even from real life experience if we were to meet Pecola and converse with her. Morrison's insight and creation of a character offers us more access to her thoughts and feelings than we could hope to create in a real world experience with a character similar to Pecola.

When I returned to Morrison's work the student's seemed to transfer their doubts about my authority to the text. "What does she mean when she writes 'high -yellow'? How do you know that means a light skinned black person?" asked one student. They had not questioned my readings of Hawthorne; they had seen me as an authority on that text. Not only did they suspect the validity of my knowledge about Morrison's work, they had no personal experience with which to interrogate the information I offered them, and formulate their own opinion.

Simply, Pecola's story seemed foreign to them. I worried that rather than introducing students to the workings of racism in American culture, I was conspiring to reinforce their notions of race as "other," as difference, as something they were without or above. I needed to find a way to ask students to examine their

own process of reading and creating meaning that might reveal to them the structures and limits implicit in their own world views, their own point of view. I needed to keep them focused on *how* power is negotiated across race and gender lines and how their own identities as white middle class kids exist within the spaces in society. As we venture into the *why* of racial identities we tripped and entangled ourselves in emotional and political vines, complete with the power politics of the classroom, and kept us from moving toward *worldliness*. Until they could recognize for themselves the construction of their own whiteness as a point of view, a privileged perspective, they could not understand the 'other's' way of seeing. bell hooks offers that "This is why it is so crucial that 'whiteness' be studied, understood, discussed - so that everyone learns that affirmation of multiculturalism, and an unbiased inclusive perspective, can and should be present whether or not people of color are present. Transforming these [white] classrooms is as great a challenge as learning how to teach well in the setting of diversity."[33]

The section of more diverse students had a different discussion sparked and kindled by the same scene in the novel. Some students thought Maureen was white, but they repositioned their reading after hearing a personal story. One of the African-American students told us of an experience which paralleled the scene in the novel. A friend at his former school had heard of his plans to go to boarding school and threw the insult "white boy" his way. The student, light skinned and deeply proud of his African-American heritage recoiled and called back "who you calling white?" The power of the personal narrative allowed the white students in the class to see the racism among shades of color in the novel. It gave them a new way of visiting Pecola's world. The quality, complexity and possibility in that classroom conversation was driven by various and multiple voices creating

[33] hooks, 43.

collective meaning. My role as teacher and figure of authority dissolved, and the literature inspired imaginative discussion.

Later in the novel, I worried again about the lens through which my white students were reading, and how they were making meaning from the text. The narrative structure folds back on itself throughout the novel, and well into the story we are presented with the childhood story of Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove. Morrison paints the picture of an unloved boy whose only ally in life, Aunt Jimmy, dies unexpectedly and leaves him at the start of adolescence without any immediate family. At the funeral he finds himself in a dark corner of the field with a distant cousin, Darlene. They'd been tossing grapes from nearby bushes at two other boys and Cholly stops to help Darlene straighten her dress and retie her bow which had fallen from her hair. In playful innocence and adolescent sexual discovery, they are partially naked in the woods, exploring.

> She tickled his ribs with her fingertips. He giggled and grabbed his rib cage. They were on top of each other in a moment. She corkscrewing her hands into his clothes. He returning the play, digging into the neck of her dress and then under her dress. When he got his hand in her bloomers, she suddenly stopped laughing and looked serious. Cholly, frightened, was about to take his hand away, but she held his wrist so he couldn't move it. He examined her then with his fingers, and she kissed his face and mouth. (33)

They are interrupted by two white hunters who insist that Cholly, "get on wid it. I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good." They shine their flashlights on the youngsters and call them "coons."

Cholly's immediate and sophisticated transference of hatred and anger at the hunters is twisted and distorted by a "violence born of total helplessness." He throws his rage at Darlene not because he hates her, but because he cannot express his rage toward the white hunters; they hold him by the power of their "long guns."

> Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters.

> Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. (33)

In considering the scene for classroom discussion I had thought only that it would help me to uncover a discussion of power relationships across race and gender lines. As we started to discuss the hierarchies of power created and negotiated between white men and black men, between black men and white women and between black men and black women, the students discussed the scene.

In their comments I began to understand that they had read the scene as a rape, and as I questioned them they grew more and more emphatic that Cholly was violent and malicious and some said "sick." I waited for someone to add their understanding of Cholly's childhood, and the damaging lessons about love that had instructed his life. I waited for someone to inject the power of the white hunters' role in this scene. I probed a little. No one offered a comment. Again I stood at the edge of the silence and tried to respect the space between the collective reading community of my classroom and the text. My students needed to negotiate their own crossings. It was my job as a teacher to convince them that the river was there, wet and real in front of them and recognition and understanding of 'other' required that they see, know and name themselves and then decide to leave their familiar shores and cross it.

I asked my students to find the troubling passage in the text, and as we read it aloud together I realized that they had read over or past detail that had set the scene as a playful, hopeful moment of adolescent love before it turned sour and became an act of violence. They had used the description from the end of the scene, under the scrutiny of the hunters glare, to generalize about the whole scene.

> Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated Her. He almost wished he could do it - hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much. (117)

Students had blamed the violence on the boy, decided arbitrarily that the girl must have been white, and had either forgotten or dismissed the presence of two white men in the scene, two white men holding "long guns" and giving orders. I was astonished; they were baffled and upset by their first reading and their collective construction of meaning that day in class. What had I done, I wondered, as a teacher to set them up for such a reading? How had they come to misunderstand the scene so thoroughly? What were they bringing to the text from their life experience?

Some psychologists who have studied cross cultural misunderstanding would call the blatant mistakes in reading 'cognitive bias.' "Cultural misunderstandings are a function of perceptual mismatches between people of different cultures; mismatches in schemes, cues, values and interpretations. While actual cultural differences contribute to many such mismatches, many perceived, apparent differences are a function of error in cognitive processing."[34] Perhaps my students' inability to identify and mark themselves as 'white' had dictated their reading of every identification of race in Pecola's story. Perhaps their white teacher had unknowingly triggered that response. Perhaps their limited life experiences with African-Americans enabled them to generalize their understandings too quickly on too little data.[35]

We've all struggled to know who we are; defining 'self' is at the core of human experience. I want students to find the essence of that struggle across cultures and while finding the connections to learn to "think in terms of experience

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[34] Robinson, 49.

[35] Studies by Katz and Zalk (1978) examined the effects of four different interventions on racial attitudes of second and fifth grade children. Of the four approaches one called vicarious contact created interracial contact and one called perceptual differentiation which drilled children in making distinctions between outgroup faces were found to be the most effective.

different from their own."[36] They needed to see through and beyond the differences to the heart of Pecola's struggle. They seemed, cognitively to be unwilling to see her in terms of themselves or themselves in terms of her. "Another cognitive bias which contributes to negative perceptions among people from different racial, ethnic and linguistic groups derives from the availability of particular cues in memory. Cues which are salient or distinctive appear to be remembered and retrieved from memory with greater frequency than common cues. For example, students may meet fifteen members of a given ethnic group who behave similarly to themselves and one who behaves differently. The one who is perceived as different will be the most available in memory."[37] If I can't move students beyond seeing "other" as different, difference will be remembered as marked and be generalized into simplistic stereotypes. If white students have little or no experience with African-Americans or with reading work of history and literature written by African-Americans, reading *The Bluest Eye* runs the risk of simply cuing and reinforcing their ideas that blacks are poor and neglect and abuse their children.

I was upset as I reflected on our work in the classroom, and on my role as a coach of a community of readers. I was disturbed as I came to understand how the students in the all white section had woven that scene into the fabric of preconceived thinking. The students seemed shaken, too. We all stood before a space that would require reflection and an examining of our assumptions to enter it.

Psychologists, in examining identity politics, discuss the difficulty of examining identities across cultures of power. It may not be possible to enter that space between cultures and keep it open and creative, a place of negotiation. The

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36 Iser, 5.

37 Ibid., 66.

politics of power are thoroughly entangled in who we are. "Because power is exercised psychologically in and through the manner by which persons, identities and psychology are constrained, some groups are dominated through the very characterization of their identities and personalities. They cannot even enter into conversations without sustaining their dominant position because their speaking positions have been defined on the basis of the very domination they hope to challenge."[38] I wondered if we were even capable of entering the space without negating it by filling it with confusion and danger. How could I, with the white of my skin a piece of that power politic, hope to challenge students to see Pecola as an "I" not an "other?" I did not doubt my ability to guide my students through a literary experience with Morrison. I have read all that she has written and have considered the value of her work as a part of the conversation that constitutes great literature in American universities. I knew I was qualifies and could be of use to them, but the politics of the classroom confused me.

bell hooks would applaud the confusion. She encourages teachers to let danger and pain into classrooms and to use it as a tool to facilitate learning. She believes the conversation about the canon is a cultural revolution in the academy. "In all cultural revolutions there are periods of chaos and confusion, times when grave mistakes are made. If we fear mistakes, doing things wrong, constantly evaluating ourselves, we will never make the academy a culturally diverse place where scholars and the curricula address every dimension of that difference."[39] Every dimension of difference includes the ways in which we read and teach the texts that challenge, in their content and in the very ways in which they are written, the dominant culture.

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38 Identity Politics Challenge to Psychologist's Understanding in *American Psychologist*, December 1994 1223.

39 hooks, 33.

readers and as teachers of reading.

How might we understand the relationship between the use of language to structure our immediate physical space and its use in creating a point of view in the world of imagined, literary space? An investigation of the relationship between a student's use of language to structure space in his or her physical world might offer some insight into that same student's propensity to extend her point of view, metaphorically, into the imaginary landscapes of literature. "From a psychological point of view the in-tandem response may be thought of as representing a displacement of the self to the external world [in this case the world of the literature, which is, of course, at the heart of the non-deictic response."[56] I am not suggesting a tidy correlation here, but the analogy, however loose, generates some useful questions.

Sven Birkerts' book *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age* discusses the relationship between the reading process and the formation of the 'self.' He talks about the 'metaphysics of reading' as being more powerful than merely broadening one's mind. "Rather," he writes, "it involves a change of state and inner orientation, and if we contemplate the reading process in this light we can hardly get away from introducing the word *soul*...Reading urges us to push the mind past the picture plan and toward a 'beyond' that is right here inside." [57]

For readers of this paper who might be more comfortable with literature than with academic prose, Elisabeth Bishop's poem "The Waiting Room" as an illustration of the power of reading to transport, dissolve, and redefine 'self.'

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56 Hill *Literacy Center*, 14.

57 Birkerts, 80.

communication around issues in language, space, and time hopes to encourage teachers to see beyond " the formal differences that can be directly perceived" and to "become more aware of how significant language differences are not necessarily audible, or in the case of written language, visible. As educators become aware of how students from various ethnocultural backgrounds differ in their use of spatial and temporal points of view, they will gain a new respect for how deeply language differences run."[55]

The pedagogical implications are, perhaps, most clear is assessment issues. Students may make sense of space on the page in different ways so that when asked to put an "X" *in front of* the misspelled word on her paper, the student's spatial orientation will dictate the placement of the mark. In this case the front/back axis translates onto the left/right axis so that a student whose spatial orientation is mirror image will interpret *in front of* to mean to *the left of* the word.

mirror image orientation	in-tandem orientation
configure	configure
X apoligise	apoligise X
imagine	imagine

Many teachers will assume that the student has difficulty following directions and in an effort to reinforce the need to listen carefully to instruction will mark the student work wrong. There are numerous applications of spatial orientations to tangible assessment issues in the classroom, but let's return to how spatial orientations and the establishment of perspective might inform our endeavors as

55 Hill, A Research Proposal entitled "Interethnic Communication in Metropolitan New York: Developing Awareness of Language Differences and Developing Strategies for Negotiation." Teachers College, Columbia University, 1996,15.

When the work of teaching and learning gets gritty with the sweat and grime of deep thinking and genuine knowing, the energy is palpable and powerful. As a teacher in a position of power in the classroom, I have to "confront [the] limitations of [my] own training and knowledge as well as a possible loss of 'authority.' Indeed, exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often create[s] confusion and chaos."[40] Creating those moments of confusion and opportunities for reflection and inquiry are at the heart of learning to see differently and explore the possibility of creating new worlds.

Encouraged by hooks, and Vinz and my own reflections, I decided that we needed to read our own reading process as a text. We needed to flush out our own racial prejudices in order to create an opening for learning, a space for us to reposition ourselves "at the interface between cultures."[41] If I could reveal to students the structures which define and contain the way they were making meaning, they could understand the limits of those structures and consider alternative world views.

I needed not only to introduce them to multiple voices and experiences in the American tradition, I needed to teach them *how to read* in multiple ways, to know the limits and constructed nature of their own perspectives and to read without imposing their own structures of knowledge on the text. If they are to "learn to read the image banks of others," I reasoned, they will need to acknowledge the limits of their own perspectives, and practice leaving familiar territory in order to experience other ways of seeing.

Toni Morrison discusses the moment in which she understood the power of such understanding in her own studies. In her book *Playing in the Dark:Whiteness*

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40 hooks, 32.

41 Hughes, 87.

and the Literary Imagination, she explores the way the Africanist presence appears in the American literary tradition and how she came to understand its meaning and role in the minds of white writers. Her personal revelation describes the epiphany my students and I need in order to hear Pecola's voice and learn from it- in order to read across the differences in culture, race, and class without limiting our vision by acting as tourists seeing only what our preconceptions filter for us.

> It is as if I had been looking at a fish bowl - the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface - and *suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.* In other words, I began to rely on my knowledge of how books get written, how language arrives; my sense of how and why writers abandon or take on certain aspects of their project. I began to rely on my understanding of what the linguistic struggle requires of writers and what they make of the surprise that is the inevitable concomitant of the act of creation. *What became transparent were the self-evident ways Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of Africanist presence.*[42]

What Morrison reveals about writers is true of the readers in my classroom. When they are within the glass bowl of white, middle-class privilege they are unable to understand that their reality is ordered and structured by that container and that the container confirms the presence of an other - an outside - an outgroup. The glass may be transparent, but it is not permeable. Students need to understand its strength and its invisible power. They need to understand the glass as a social construction, ground smooth and polished by the power of privilege. Teachers need to encourage students to challenge the assumptions behind their readings and ask student to examine the ways in which words both represent their worlds and generate the journey through the glass. Words, in conversations and in the

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42 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard University Press, London 1992), 17.

language of literature, are the fabric of the magic carpet ride which offers access to the world of another. That access, that communication across cultures creates powerful possibility for living and working in a pluralistic democracy.

Literature provides the most fertile ground for cross-cultural understanding and for the negotiation of new energized space, space full of possibility, between cultures. In *The Gutenberg Elegies: the Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age* Sven Birkerts discusses the 'privacies of reading.' In a chapter entitled "Paging the Self" he contends that "serious reading is above all an agency of self-making."[43] The reader enters a world in which the power of personal experience and reflection on that experience is part of the reading process. Adolescents are particularly ripe for the experience, for their physical lives are full of the questions of self-formation: Who am I? Why am I doing this? What should I do? (What do others expect of me?) "The book -the novel that is- becomes the site for testing transformations. Indeed, whatever else it may be, diversion or escape, the novel at this stage of life is primarily a screen that will accept various versions and projections of the self."[44] Fiction, then, provides a place for playful and serious exploration, for the trying on of ideas and perspectives as we shape our understanding of ourselves and of others, as we come to build conceptual frameworks for our world and learn to read the frameworks of other world views. Birkerts offers that reading fiction allows us to "slip free from our burdensome layer of contingent identity in order to experience the consciousness of another."[45] In literary landscapes, created by skilled authors who use words to paint worlds and points of view, we are more likely, perhaps even more able, to travel to the unknown, to see what we might not notice during our daily lives.

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[43] Birkerts, 87.
[44] Ibid., 89.
[45] Ibid., 93

IV. A Leap from Linguistics to Literature.

> To choose an attitude toward interpretation - and therefore toward language- these days is to choose more than just an attitude: it is to choose a politics of reading, it is to choose an ethics of reading.
>
> Alice Jardine
> "Opaque Texts and Transparent Contexts."

Teachers of literature are continually trying to understand how students use reading as a technology to transform words into meaning. Classroom discussions can transform a student's reading of the text and deepen or reinvent that student's understanding of the literature. In discussion, students negotiate their differing points of view and understandings of the text. As students use language to make cognitive sense of the reading material, they must also construct a social space with other students, and with the teacher, to communicate their own understanding. That communication and negotiation will, then, inform their initial reading of the text and serve to reposition themselves in relation to the text. It is a non-linear, complex process full of possibility, but nearly impossible to study.

Linguists have made concrete contributions to the study of how we make sense of the world with words, and how we communicate that understanding to others who hold different conceptualizations. Linguists have been studying how language reveals spatial and temporal points of view. "The domain of language itself can be understood as an interface that reveals variation fundamental to both the ways in which we conceptualize the world [sociocognitive] and the ways in which we constitute our sociocultual identities..." as we communicate the concept

which frame our understanding of the world.[46] The work of linguists is helpful to teachers of language and literature because it provides a quantifiable way of measuring a person's point of view, at least in regards to the point of view in their immediate physical space. In order to understand its potential usefulness to teachers, it is necessary to discuss the fundamentals of how language structures and reveals spatial orientations.

Deixis: a discussion of linguistic anchors in social space.

'Deixis' is a term used by linguists to locate -in language- a speaker's position in space and time. "By deixis is meant the location and identification of persons, objects, events, processes and activities being talked about, or referred to, in relations to the spatiotemporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the participation in it, typically, of a single speaker and at least one addressee."[47] A speaker often uses certain words to indicate perspective in a conversation. The speaker's particular stance in relation to the partner in conversation and the matter under discussion must be made clear to both parties if communication is to be successful. When I stand in front of a glass case, for example, to order coffee and a muffin, I stand in a face-to-face *con-front*-ation with the server behind the counter. When I ask for the muffin to the right of the croissant it may not be immediately clear which muffin I intend to buy. By using a demonstrative pronoun, I can locate my words and therefore make my meaning clear.

"I'd like the muffin to *your* right."

In such an utterance the speaker relinquishes her stance, her point of view, and

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[46] Clifford Hill, Lecture Outline for International Linguistics Conference at Teachers College Columbia University April 13, 1996.

[47] John Lyons *Semantics* Vol.2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 637.

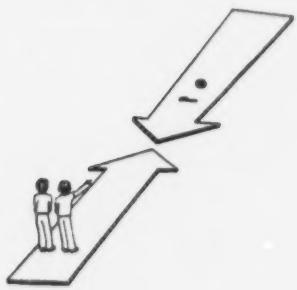
shifts it to the other person in order to be more easily understood.

Studies done by Clifford Hill have examined how speakers of different languages structure and name spatial and temporal points of view in their physical worlds. He has found that speakers of standard English vary their spatial orientations depending on the real world situation. "In observing the world from a static perspective, we tend to view it within an enclosed space and thus are oriented toward ourselves."[48] This deictic orientation correlates to what is called 'mirror image' or 'face-to-face' imagery. (See Diagram B) Much of our daily life in the western world is conducted in space constructed for face-to-face interactions. "Our most persistent form of sensory experience - vision- runs primarily along the front/back axis; and it is here, too that our most persistent form of social life - interaction with other human beings- is transacted. Such social interaction is, of course normally conducted face-to-face."[49] Add to this the fact that much of our technology reinforces a mirror image perspective. Television sets and computers, tools which occupy much of our time, wrap us in a face-to-face reflected space.

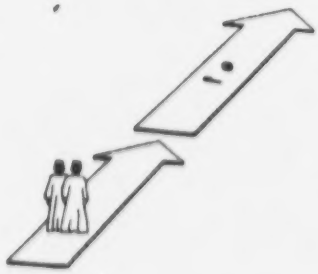
Despite all these reinforcements for speakers of standard English to be deictic and mirror-image in orientation, people will shift their spatial orientation if the context demands it to be different. "...when we are in motion, we are prone to ascribe a dynamism to what we observe and thus view it as oriented, along with ourselves, toward a further point on the horizon."[50] If, for example, you are driving down a street and see in the distance a child on a bicycle and a dog loyally trotting behind her, you might say to your companion, "Watch out for the girl *in front of* that dog." Because you are yourself in motion you are more likely to project

48 Hill, International Linguistics Conference (April 1996), 6.
49 Hill, *Linguistic Research on Spatial Orientation: African and Africa-American Continuities*, Literacy Center Report 91-1, 9.
50 Hill *Literacy Center* 1991, 14.

your point of view into the space *in front of* you. Such an orientation represents a shift from the face-to-face orientation and is called by linguists an 'in-tandem' orientation.



Mirror-image perspective
There is my pen in front of the ball



In-tandem perspective
There is my pen in back of the ball

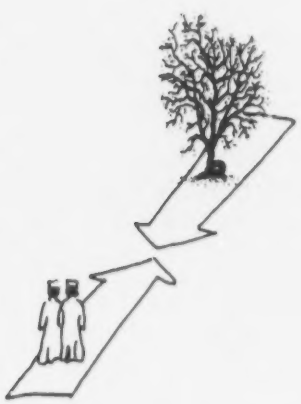
[Diagram. B taken from Hill April 13, 1996 ILC]

Hill's studies have shown that "African-American speakers of English are more prone than European-American speakers to use the in-tandem perspective, which, from a sociocognitive perspective [cognitive understanding as it is expressed in language use], can be associated with a more dynamic [less static] mode of constructing the world."[51] He stresses, however, that "the greater use of in-tandem among African-Americans must be understood in the context of how individuals vary language use as a means of constituting sociocultural [as opposed to sociocognitive] identities..."[52] The important point here is that while certain sociocultural groups may use different spatial orientations, "speakers of any language are accustomed to shifting deictic imagery in response to varying real

51 Hill *International Linguistics Conference*, April 1996, 6.
52 Ibid.

world configurations."[53]

I've already demonstrated how people tend to shift orientations when they are themselves in motion: motion somehow triggers an in-tandem orientation in people who are typically deictic and mirror-image. The other recurring variable is whether or not the object being described is visible to the speaker. For example, speakers who use , consistently, the in-tandem perspective will shift to the mirror-image orientation when the object is not visible. (See Diagram C)



There is our ball behind the tree

[Diagram C adapted from Hill April 13, 1996 ILC]

Hill is confident that these "two major contrasts - visible versus invisible and static versus dynamic - have been established as motivating a shift in deictic imagery."[54]

How is this research useful to teachers? Hill, in studying interethnic

53 Hill *Literacy Center* 1991, 19.

54 Ibid., 11.

communication around issues in language, space, and time hopes to encourage teachers to see beyond " the formal differences that can be directly perceived" and to "become more aware of how significant language differences are not necessarily audible, or in the case of written language, visible. As educators become aware of how students from various ethnocultural backgrounds differ in their use of spatial and temporal points of view, they will gain a new respect for how deeply language differences run."[55]

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56 Hill *Literacy Center*, 14.
57 Birkerts, 80.

In the Waiting Room

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
it was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grownup people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.
My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited I read
the National Geographic
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
-"Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string'
black naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.
And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.

Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I --we--were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.
Why should you be one too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see where it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.
Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How --I didn't know any
word for it -- how "unlikely"...
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
In Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was till the fifth
of February, 1918.

Reading creates a dream world that is often more alert, vibrant, and awake than our daily lives. At its best, when a story grabs hold of us, it is "an emblem of paradoxical doubleness, where the physical self is rooted in one world, and the inner self is almost entirely dissolved away from its reliance on the immediate."[58]

Not all students are readers and not all readers are transported by the same types of fiction. Will a reader who completes one reading task with an in-tandem construction of space, position herself in a literary landscape with a similar orientation? Will a student who is anchored by a mirror-image view of space hold onto that perspective when reading literary texts? Will that student view the imagined space of the literary landscape as a mirror to be understood as a reflection of his or her own life's experience? While it has been documented that "speakers of any language are accustomed to shifting deictic imagery in response to varying real world configurations,"[59] will students naturally shift perspectives in the landscapes of literature? What sort of "real world configurations" (like the motion and vision variables) can teachers create to encourage students to take on various points of view and explore multiple meanings in texts? Will the student who is accustomed to using deictic imagery to define physical space be able to abandon the "positionality" of that point of view and take on the perspective and point of view of the "other" when reading literature?

Jerome Bruner uses this piece of linguistic study to season what psychologists understand about early childhood development. He believes that young children are capable of understanding and using deictic shifters to place themselves and their companions in space and time. "A deictic shifter is an expression whose meaning

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58 Sven Birkerts The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 86.

59 Hill ,Literary Center (1991), 14.

one can grasp only through appreciating the interpersonal context in which it is uttered and by whom it is uttered."[60] Children learn quickly that when I use the pronoun 'I' it refers to me; when my partner in conversation uses it it refers to him. Words which indicate a speaker's stance in physical space - words like *here* or *there* or *far* of *near* help to locate the speaker and establish the point of view of the utterance. *Here,* when I use the word means a spot close to me; when you use it it means a spot close to you. "The shifter ought to be hard to solve for the child and yet it isn't."[61] If children learn easily the linguistic devices to shift perspectives as they acquire language, what can we do as teachers to create classrooms which reinforce that natural flexibility and practice it in more complicated cognitive functions? The ability to shift points of view, to understand the foundations and limits of one's own way of seeing and to be able to project oneself into another person's point of view is critical to life and citizenry in a pluralistic democracy. It ought to be at the center of our instruction in schools. Clearly students have the capacity to understand multiple ways of seeing, but their skills need use and refinement in order to generate possibility in our diverse society.

Bruner challenges the notion that the child is essentially an egocentric being and considers that the context of the situation or the 'real world configuration' is the indicator for a child's propensity to shift points of view.

> The child's mastery of deictic shifters suggests that egocentrism per se is not the problem. It is when the child fails to grasp the structure of events that he adopts an egocentric framework. The problem is not with competence but with performance. *It is not that the child does not have the capacity to take another's perspective, but rather that he cannot do so without understanding the situation in which he is operating.*[62]

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60 Jerome Bruner *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1986), 60.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 68.

The 'situation' which Bruner refers to here has also been called the 'event structure' by Margaret Donaldson. Her work redesigned the well-known mountain perspectives studies which reinforced the Piagetian notion that children are unable to see the world from another's point of view. Her studies created a familiar context for the children and within that context asked them to explore a foreign perspective. The 'event structure' might refer to the physical event within which the conversation occurs or in the case of a classroom discussion around literature, it might mean the parameters and rules of the discussion and the ways in which we, as teachers, ask students to read texts.

If we create a clear and familiar context for the literature we use in the classroom and construct scaffoldings on which our students are invited to build their own meanings, they might be more likely to project themselves into the world of literature. As the story of our journey with *The Bluest Eye* indicates, however, entering the text in carefully designed ways, with 'event structures' and assignments which might serve as conduits to alternate ways of seeing the world, does not guarantee practice in learning how to 'see' differently.

The reading experience is richest when multiple voices collectively construct meaning. The space of the classroom must hold many perspectives in order for the word 'seeing' to implode with the power of all its meaning - to see, to perceive, to know, to understand, to be wise. Mary Catherine Bateson talks about learning as a homecoming.

> The world we live in is the one we are able to perceive; it becomes gradually more intelligible and more accessible with the building up of coherent mental models. Learning to know a community or a landscape is a homecoming. Creating a vision of that community or landscape is homemaking.[63]

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63 Mary Catherine Bateson, *Peripheral Visions Learning Along the Way* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 213

The teacher and the students and the texts need constantly to create their own visions of the world and build new homes, new places for their 'selves' to live and to learn.

Metaphors generate vision and define our ways of seeing.

High school students often complain about having to learn to label literary devices in language. "Why," they want to know "do we have to know the difference between a metaphor and simile?" They are convinced that high school English teachers across the nation conspire to keep students labeling the mechanics of literature. "We'll never have to know this except for this course" is their most common defense.

When the chorus grows too loud, I ask them to carry a small notebook everywhere they go for one day. The first day they are to record every utterance they hear which contains a comparison. At lunch, in the halls, during class, on the athletic fields, in the showers, they are to keep their ears tuned for the metaphors which float in the air. They compile long lists and often come to class discussing the metaphors buried in our speech, metaphors implicit in our thinking; metaphors which we collectively assume and at which our conversation hints. The next day students are to travel through their activities without using a metaphor in their oral or written language. They are to act as if metaphor were not a part of their linguistic toolbox, not a tool in the building of their conceptual frameworks. Such exercises quickly convinces that metaphor is deeply embedded in our daily life.

Lakoff and Johnson, in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) contend that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and

action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."[64] The metaphors which surface in everyday language are linguistic expressions of people's ways of understanding, their ways of conceiving of the world. "If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do everyday is very much a matter of metaphor."[65] The implications for communicating across cultures, whether we are considering national cultures bounded by language and geography or the cultures of class or religion within one nation, are worth exploring.

Lakoff and Johnson propose that *systems* of metaphor operate within cultures and structure both the way we *think* and the way we *talk* about shared ideas. For example, they offer the common metaphor -"time is money"- and suggest that the popular saying sits at the surface of a broad and deep conceptual structure of modern western culture. We say things like

> You're *wasting* my time.
> How do you *spend* your time these day?
> I've *invested* a lot of time in this project.
> You need to *budget* your time.
> He's living on *borrowed* time.
> I *lost* a lot of time when I was sick[66]

The fact that we speak of time with such consistency as a commodity and as a limited resource suggests that we understand time, conceptually, within a whole system of metaphors under the heading "time is money." The overriding metaphor informs most of the language we use to talk about and, therefore, *think* about time.

Words are but one 'language' of the world, and we rely on them to interpret what we see, taste, think, and feel. With the written word we try to quantify what

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64 Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 8.

we know, but knowing comes through *all* sense, *all* at once in *all* the languages we use to live. Writing is but one interpretation of life and like a translation of Montaigne from French to English it is necessarily altered in the process of trying to convey meaning, like a foreign novel it will be changed from the travel over oceans and across cultures. Words are but a leaky vessel for thought.

In trying to tie abstraction and complex experience to language, we are forced to confine what is limitless. We are forced to speak of the sea (its salt and cold and grit and creatures and buoyancy and the sticky film it leaves on own skin) in metaphor, and so we understand it in terms of something known, something smaller. Even with the help of the metaphor, however, we can hold only one image in our mind at a time. When we live it the 'knowledge' is present all at once. Language confines it; it imposes an order on the world of experience and thought. The order may lead us down many paths, enable us to see multiple meanings, but not all at once.

If you've ever had to describe the color red to a blind person you understand how dependent language is on experience, how rich it can be when it grows from common experience. "It looks like a ripe tomato in a sunny windowsill" doesn't transcend the darkness. "It feels like the deep warm, almost too hot heat of a wood stove stoked on a cold evening" might be closer to a part of it. "It tastes like a fire ball." Nothing quite defines it so that the blind might see. How presumptuous, really, to think that language alone could perform such a miracle – to let the blind see. And yet we expect it to convey meaning, to generate, hold and deliver ideas to other people and across differences.

Most speakers and writers think of metaphor as a way to enhance and embellish a conceptual understanding. It is a way to invite readers or listeners into an understanding or experiencing of one idea in terms of another. It is a way to

inflate words with richer meaning. Usually metaphor enriches and enlarges the concept, but Lakoff and Johnson suggest that it can also limit conceptual understanding. "A metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor."[67] "Time is money," for example, focuses us on a deficit model where time is a currency to be spent. We have difficulty seeing it in any other way. Some cultures, however, view time as what linguists mark as positive (+), that is it builds and grows. Growing older then becomes *gaining* wisdom and respect, power and recognition even though one is *spending* time.

Lakoff and Johnson examine the conceptual metaphors we use to talk about language to reveal some of the ways in which metaphors might "hide" ways of thinking. They refer to the "conduit metaphor" for talking about language. In this conceptual metaphor ideas (meanings) are objects, linguistic expressions are containers, and communication is sending. Most of us think of language this way. "The speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes the idea (object) out of the word (containers)." The structure of this conceptual framework is revealed in such common phrases as:

> It's difficult to *put* my ideas *into* words
> When you *have* a good idea, try to *capture* it immediately in words.
> Try to *pack* more thought *into* fewer words.
> The meaning is *right there in* the words.
> His words *carry* little meaning.[68]

While these phrases are familiar and comfortable and serve a common understanding of how language operates, they limit our understanding of the power of language to communicate and to generate new thinking. The metaphor suggests that words have meanings unto themselves and could exist without a speaker or a

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67 Ibid., 10.
68 Ibid.

context. Are words simply containers for meanings? Are meanings contained by words or do words spill over the lip and shape and mold meanings?

Anyone with small children has experienced a versatility in language which defies this tidy metaphor for the functions of language. Words are created and take on bizarre meanings as a child acquires language through experience. Words are symbols. The word is not the thing; it is a symbol for the thing. We can and often do ascribe meaning to words as they suit our own understanding. Those meanings are pliable and often change as we inform the symbol with multiple meanings. This is, perhaps, best illustrated with an example.

Words function best, have their richest meanings, in use with a group of people who hold common understandings of the symbols. When a child spends the night at a friend's house and asks, "Can I have egg-in-a-cup for breakfast?" the child is likely to meet some consternation from the adult. The phrase doesn't have a specific meaning in the friend's kitchen; it might mean many things. In this child's system of symbols "egg-in-a-cup" is a soft-boiled egg because soft boiled eggs have always arrived at her table in her own home in a tall, blue and white striped egg cup.

Metaphorical concepts provide a partial structuring of our understanding. They can "highlight" certain aspects of a concept and in so doing will "necessarily hide other aspects of the concept."[69] In language and in metaphor there is always some slippage, some sliding between the meaning and the words, so the structuring cannot be total. A metaphor can serve as a vehicle for understanding. It can deliver an idea with speed and accuracy but the image of its arrival might keep the receiver from alternative ways of understanding. The vehicle itself might lock out a different way of seeing , a way of seeing which might generate new thinking or alternative understandings. The more we are aware of our own frameworks for

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69 Ibid.

understanding, our own structures for conceiving of ideas, the more able we will be to understand the frames of others.

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So what does all this have to do with reading?

As readers we are constantly adjusting our position to the text. The very act of reading requires that we search and sift through our own personal and political, social and cultural knowledge in order to construct our own meaning for the symbols that we see on the printed page. "We are actively present at every moment, scripting and constructing. The writer may tell us, "The mother wore a shabby, discolored dressing gown,; but he word canisters are empty until we load them form our private reservoirs...Fully engaged, we work with the writer to build our own book."[70]

The symbols themselves are slippery, for they are merely a representation of meaning waiting to be reconstructed or reproduced by a reader into a particular and specific meaning –a meaning which grows from but is specific to that reader's relation to the text. (This is the essence of the reader-response movement in literary theory.) Words slide among various understandings depending on the cultural connotations and personal experience of both the writer and the reader. They signify; they cue us. "-the word is the serpent eating it tail; it is the sign that disappears in its act of singing - the signing is not complete until the word has disappeared into its puff of meaning... The word is most signifier when it least signifies."[71] The symbol is not the thing nor was it ever meant to be. The symbol represents the thing. An author's choice of a word and syntax in any given sentence,

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[70] Birkerts, 83.

[71] Birkerts, 78.

then, might lend itself to multiple meanings. While reading may lack the intensity, it is as creative an act as writing.

Skilled writers use the slippery nature of symbols –this floating quality of language– to enrich the interaction, charge the dialectic, between writer and reader. The skilled writer controls the effect of her words by manipulating language and narrative. She has her skill with these tools, but she is not in control of her reader's reaction. She steers her message as a harbor pilot might navigate a ship to its slip at dock. She does her best to read the waters and the wind, calculate the currents, and guide the vessel to its slip, but she cannot be sure the reader is positioned, standing on the end of the dock, ready and willing to climb aboard. In fact, the energy in such a dialectic between a writer's symbols and a reader's understanding of them include the possibility of misunderstanding and confusion –particularly when we are struggling to communicate across cultures or in foreign waters.

How then is a white western reader to read the work of an Indian writer or an African or an African American or a Native American? How are African-American and Hispanic and Asian students to read traditionally canonical texts? Will the linguistic alchemy of another culture, with different spatial orientations, different cultural cues, be effective across difference in language and culture and personal experience? How might a reader position himself at the dock, ready and willing to board the author's ship and float in her sea? What must a reader bring to the book in order to not only 'see' but to 'know' the world of the literature? Birkerts' discusses the paradox inherent in reading powerful fiction. The reader is fully engaged in the world of the words on the page and simultaneously pours her own experience into that world in order to build the literary landscape. "Reading may be, as I have suggested, the positing of an elsewhere, but the activity is not spatially

static - it is a dynamic condition."[72] As a reader I cannot abandon all that I know and all of my ways of knowing –empty myself– in order to drink in a world foreign to me. I must come to the text, to the literary world as I am, climb aboard to listen and to make sense of the new experience in terms of what I know. I can only come to the end of that dock with my imagination and my knowledge of the world. I must remake the world of that literature and find my own meaning in it. I must construct my own meanings from the symbols and signals the skilled language and the literary waters offered me.

In constructing that personal meaning the reader must understand the limits of her own knowledge, just as the writer acknowledges and then manipulates the limits of her system of symbols. The reader searches for what is recognizable, tries to identify connections and take in new knowledge as it is measured against that reader's way of knowing the world. We need not feel trapped by the window frame of our own culture nor do we need to tear down the home which houses that frame in order to rebuild our understanding. We may not be able to widen the structural frame of the window, but we can certainly stick our heads out to gain a broader view.

Trinh T. Minh-ha writes criticism on women's literature and offers this caveat. "Awareness of the limits in which one works need not lead to any form of indulgence in personal partiality, nor to the narrow conclusion that it is impossible to understand anything about other peoples since the difference is one of 'essence.'"[73] As readers we can only recognize what we know and work to understand what is new to us.

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[72] Birkerts, 84.

[73] Trinh T. Minh-ha *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, 1991.

V. Examining sites of learning in literature.

How do we "know" other people?
How do we learn to see?

In an effort to combine the systemic approach to multicultural curriculums - Banks notion that multicultural education is more "a way of thinking" than a list of books- the theory about reading as a form of self-making and the lessons from the reflective practice of teaching literature across difference, I offer two examples. Multicultural curriculums are often attacked by conservative educators and scholars for devaluing Western tradition and neglecting Great Books. It is sometimes attacked from more liberal scholars and educators for its relaxed standards and efforts to bend with student's tastes.

The examples which follow seeks to combine the goals of multicultural education with the academic rigor and cultural capital associated with authors like Shakespeare. If multiculturalism is a lens through which to view the world, a way of looking, a habit of seeing, then most canonical material can be read, explored, discussed and studied in multicultural ways. (See Diagram A, page 8) We can teach students to read in multiple ways, hear various voices present in one text, consider the voices which are absent and promote serious thinking and reading in multiple directions from the canon.

While it may be part of a multicultural curriculum to grant students the freedom to choose the genre of their assessment or to represent their learning as they wish. They might use -dance, monologues, character descriptions, dialogues, stories, poems, articles, drawings, photographs- and each of those forms might make the work more interesting, creative and accessible when students are offered an option. It is critical, however, to students' academic success that they have practiced

and are skilled in writing an analytical essay. They need to have access to the power that academic writing will afford them. Just as they need to have read some Shakespeare, if only to pick up references to Iago and Prospero, they need to have learned to write the discourse of the academy if they are to pursue higher education. To deny students, especially students of color and poor students, access to those schools is to lock them out of opportunity for power in society.

Keeping the language of learning to see and to know the world from multiple perspectives at the center of the curriculum, I offer two pieces of literary analysis which might be used as particular ways of reading and teaching the text. They are literary criticism, not curriculum, but they examine sites of learning within literature. If students are asked to explore the ways in which one character comes to see and to know another and can examine the process by which that learning creates broader or limits the scope of vision, they will necessarily examine their own ways of seeing and reading. Raka in *Fire on the Mountain* comes to know India through her great grandmother's experience. Anita Desai's prose lets us enter the world of post colonial India with or without knowledge of its history, culture and politics. The nature of her skillful writing opens access to what might be considered a culturally bound text. If students are reading to examine sites of learning as they read Shakespeare's Othello, the play opens itself to readers. Othello comes to see Desdemona as an unfaithful, lying whore despite clear evidence which proves her loyal, and a reading of his prejudice to see her as whore will foster discussions about *how* we *see*, *know*, and *create* the world in which we live.

Reading Across Difference. Anita Desai creates India

An entry from my learning log inspired me to rethink the reading of Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain*. I first read the novel in preparation for a literature course in graduate school. The first reading drew me into the relationship between the great-grandmother who had lived her whole life in India and Raka, a child raised in the West and coming 'home' to India for the first time. After the course, which included literary theory about writers from previously colonized countries and a little bit of Indian history, the reading became rich in cultural cues which I had been blind to the first time.

> *Rich texts get richer with reading and rereading. People, smart people, with all of their lives to draw on – with all of their knowing – pour into and work out of the words and the spaces between words. It makes me want to choose one book to read over and over again – just one book for all of my life. I would read it always with different people and in different moods, at different times of day so that I may know it again and again and never let it mean just one thing.*
> *I can't quantify this kind of learning. It flows through me –energizes me like that water bottle of warm lemonade on a cold, wet winter hike. The warmth slides down the core and radiates; my fingers seem to glow inside my wool mittens. I can't hold onto this knowledge –it moves like quicksilver and resists being held captive. I can only know it as it passes through me –like water is held, briefly in cupped hands and then trickles through the cracks of flesh pressed tight against its loss. This learning flows through my fingers, slips through, leaving them wet with experience. That experience transforms me as a reader. I am different now. I know different things.*

The close reading which follows assumes some knowledge of the book, but can easily be read as an example of how texts can work as doorways into cultures unfamiliar to the reader, but do not necessarily require cultural knowledge. The example seeks to demonstrate the versatility of reading and the power of words to

transport us into new territory.

Anita Desai's skill with the English language shows us that meaning is made anew and again and again depending on the cultural position and personal experience of the reader. Her story reaches many readers who stand in very different positions to it. Her prose operates like a hologram. It is a clear film plate portraying a picture of a old woman's struggle to identify across generations with a great-grandchild who has been raised outside of the country. The care and craft of the picture itself has a universal appeal and a first reading of Fire on the Mountain need go no further; it is a sound story of human experience. But when the photographic plate is illuminated by the coherent light of a rigorous and culturally specific reading, the hologram reveals a story of the India held within Nanda Kaul; an India strangling itself in the process of trying to define itself as a free state.

The accuracy and art of Desai's prose and the craft of her story telling are worthy of praise for their aesthetic value alone and can be appreciated solely on that literary level. Many readers will meet her here, and they will learn a little about India and a lot about people. They will enjoy descriptions of heat that leave "flies, too lazy for flight, caught in the midday web" of sunlight, and "buzz languorously, voluptuously, slowly unsticking their feet and crawling across the ceiling..." (p.22) But a reader perched at a different window, waiting at a different dock will find, also, the presence of the political underneath the deceptively delicate descriptions and clear prose. The art of Desai's prose does not disguise it or try to separate out the politics of her writing and one need not decide on one reading over another, for they are intertwined. Fire on the Mountain is at once universal and culturally specific, aesthetic and political.

Part I places Nanda Kaul in a specific space and time in her human experience and in her home, India. She has withdrawn to a hilltop. Retired. But she is

perched at Carignano in full view of that which she seeks to escape. The house belonged first to a Colonel (who lost all seven children to the military business of building a British empire) and next to a series of British ladies, all of whom worked hard to pull lush, full flowers from the dry soil of rocks and pines. Desai shows us the beauty of what grows wild and the wisdom of leaving it as it is and loving Carignano's stark barrenness.

> Like (Nanda Kaul), the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, of withering away and an elimination, at a state of elegant perfection. It was made up of very few elements, but they were exact and germane as the strokes in a Japanese scroll. She no more wished to add to them than she wished to add to her own pared, reduced and radiantly single life. She could no more picture a child – a new additional child – in this perfected and natural setting than she could a pergola of roses, a marble faun or a fountain. She wished for none of these. On the contrary the thought of them sickened as a box of sweets might sicken. (31)

Nanda Kaul's love of the light and the space of Kasauli is relayed to us in a brilliant narrative. The words are not as a simple rejection of western nimeity, or a putting aside of "the great, heavy, difficult book that she had" been required to read as the wife of the Vice–Chancellor. (30) It is not a nostalgic longing for a life free of colonial debris, nor is it a secret cherishing of what was once India. Desai describes the deliberate gardens that once existed and then lets the reader watch Nanda Kaul reconstruct the meaning of Kasauli, its views, its land, its space as she understands her own presence on the hill.

Carignano is for sale to her only because the British have withdrawn. Desai tells us "the little town went native," but we must remember that Nanda Kaul has withdrawn too. She is trying to forget her past as the wife of the Vice Chancellor in Punjab, but she can only understand the quiet and austerity in terms of her life there, a life too full of children and guests. The letter from Asha (which comes from

overseas), the scream of the phone and the shriek of Ila Das's voice all threaten her attempts to push her past away and to forget. Desai's prose lets us recognize what we can –namely the need for solitude and an old woman's longing for peace– and then lets us watch Nanda Kaul's process of coming to know, again, her own relation to this, her native land.

Raka is the child of a mother driven crazy by the life of diplomacy –that is, a life spent living in London or Geneva or New York, a life spent away from Kasauli, a life spent spinning exotic images of India for the western world. Raka arrives at Carignano with very little real knowledge of India, but she is drawn to its surprises. If Nanda Kaul retreats to the knoll in order to relish the starkness, the barrenness of the landscape from afar, Raka digs at the hillside to expose all its scars, to know its horrific history. Raka disappears from the walls, the structures of the house. She is off to explore. She is attracted not to what she knows about the country from her parents, but is fascinated by its secrets, the slag heap of its cracks and crevices. "Her father and grandmother had extolled the beauties and delights of a Himalayan hill–station to her, but said nothing of factories. Here was such an enormous one that Raka wondered at their ignorance of it."(42)

Raka makes a habit of escaping the rigid routines of Nanda Kaul. The tea which never satisfies her hunger and the stories which taste somehow artificial and strike a "false note", send her scurrying off in search of "the shoals of rusted tins, bundles of stained newspaper, peels, rags and bones." (41) Through Raka's eyes Desai shows us the India Nanda Kaul is so determined to leave behind. We accompany Raka and see the Pasteur Institute, the trash in the ravines, the charred remains of a life Nanda Kaul once led.

But we can read the descriptions as more than a child's relentless curiosity. Raka's explorations are an escape not unlike Nanda Kaul's own withdrawal to

Carignano. Her travels let her come to know a Kasauli "that neither summer visitors nor upright citizens of the town ever knew." (63) She understands and is drawn to the devastation of the destroyed, charred remains.

When Raka inquires about the letter and possible news of her mother, Nanda Kaul tells her the truth. The child runs up the hill and is comforted and even inspired by the "ravaged" and "barren" spaces of the old house. She is drawn to the "seared remains of the safe, cozy, civilized world" because she knew she'd have no part of it. She "owned no attachment to it." (91) Her mother's illness leaves her trapped. Desai's description of Raka's emotional release operates on two levels.

> **Here she stood, in the blackened shell of a house that the next storm would bring down, looking down the ravine to the tawny plains that crackled in the heat, so much more intense after the rain... She raised herself onto the tips of her toes –tall, tall as a pine– stretched out her arms till she felt the yellow light strike the spark down her fingertips and along her arms till she was alight, ablaze. (91)**

We can read her words as an intense description of the emotional fires of desperation Raka must feel at this turn in her future, or we can hold the hologram up to the bright hot Indian sun to see this scene as Raka's rehearsal for the Sati she will perform at the end of the story.

Raka is the fire that will free Nanda Kaul from having to cope with debris of final eruption in her life. The phone call from the police officer triggers an explosion of all that she sought to escape. Raka's whisper and tap at the window then becomes a reassurance of control. The fire will not discriminate. Its flames will lick all the cracks and crevices.

Desai's skill with description, her dexterity with language and syntax, has crafted a story with a style and structure which is palatable to many readers in various positions. It can be digested on several levels. We read this story not as

Nanda Kaul listens to the shrill voice and graphic horrors of Ila Das's stories. "She was a dramatic raconteur; it took nerve to listen to her relate the hair-raising stories of her experiences as a welfare officer, and Nanda Kaul sat straighter and stiffer than ever, as if horror were slowly paralysing her." (128) Desai's prose is coy. She has a soft, seductive voice which pulls us along her tale and lets us hear and understand whatever level of horror we can tolerate. The images she creates exist in full view on a clear photographic plate until the light hits it at just the right angle, and it explodes into a shimmering image of India.

Othello in a multicultural curriculum?

"Look to her Moor if thou hast eyes to see
She has deceived her father and may thee."
-Othello I.iii.292

Othello offers us lessons on how prejudice sometimes works in unexpected ways. In it is a chance to examine how prejudice teaches us to discount other ways of seeing. The possibilities of the play are endless. Prejudice is operative in unexpected ways and the play suggests that the seeds of prejudice grow in common and universal human characteristics. After the first Act's continual reference to Othello's black skin and alien heritage, the reader might ignore the racial and ethnic differences between Othello and the rest of the cast. Examples of blatant prejudice appear early in the play, particularly in Brabantio's lines, but fade as the story unfolds. Without Othello's face on stage to remind us, the audience might well forget the contrast his skin color provides.

For while one can certainly read Othello as the story of a Moor whose failed assimilation leads to tragedy, or see it as a play about the impossibility of mixed marriages and the difficulties of a racially diverse world, Othello offers us greater insights into the sources and workings of prejudice. Othello himself is both victim and agent of prejudice in this play.

To select and classify information so that it coincides with our personal experience of the world is a skill critical to human survival. What is appalling about prejudice in social systems is not that people pre–judge, for that is not dissimilar to the selecting and categorizing we need to do each day. What is

appalling and destructive about prejudice as a social force is the arrest of that selecting process. When people see no further than their initial perception, when they, in fact, refuse to see evidence that might alter their original stereotype they become blind to blatant truths and prone to "judge without proper grounds or suitable knowledge."[74]

Brabantio' role in Othello is often used by critics to demonstrate Iago's conniving manipulations of truth. He is depicted as a sort of warmup or dumb show for the undoing Iago will perform on Othello later. Rather than considering Iago's part as agent of Othello's demise let us look at what it is in Brabantio in Act I and in Othello later in the play, that allows them to ignore or discount clear evidence and choose to believe in Iago's fictive reality.

Brabantio's racial prejudice is so crude that he might be easily dismissed as a bigot beyond reform. He is the Archie Bunker of Venice; a man who "oft invited" the Moor into his home to dine and tell stories, but who cannot tolerate the Moor out of his proper place. He cannot see Othello's military glory or his graces with the Duke, and cannot see beyond his skin to accept that his daughter might love the man within it. His discomfort with the marriage goes beyond the paternal prejudice that becomes most fathers. It is not that no man is good enough for his daughter, but that almost anyone, even the once rejected Roderigo, would be better than the Moor. One wonders, what did Othello ever do to Brabantio that he is so despised?

Brabantio is a Senator in the land of laws, a keeper of order in the city of civility. He is a symbol of reason and justice and yet in a matter of minutes he is convinced, without evidence and beyond reason, that his daughter has been stolen from his home, swept away by a 'foul thief.' What is it that allows a man so

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74. Webster's Dictionary

invested in reason and law, in a moment to be so positive about the security of Venice, and in the next to be so completely convinced of Othello's "foul charms"?

Iago's screams shake Brabantio from a secure sleep to an "odd–even" world of wild beasts and licentious lovers known to us as "valiant Othello" and "gentle Desdemona." While he initially resists this painted world, once Brabantio gives himself over to it he believes it to the core and explores it no more. Before he has even found his daughter or confronted Othello, he has formulated his opinion and articulated his reaction: "Belief of it oppresses me already." (I.i.143) What has changed in him? What, in him, allows him to believe such dark fictions of the streets while he rejects Othello's story and his daughter's testimony of love and duty to her new husband? He acts as if he has erased from his memory the nights he has spent in Othello's company so that he can keep consistent his new image of this black beast.

Brabantio's safe Venetian world of law and order has collapsed and his "particular grief/Is of so flood–gate and o'erbearing nature" that he must cling to whatever will keep him afloat in these tormented seas. Othello's furtive marriage to his daughter stands "against all rule of nature." (I.iii.101) and when Brabantio seeks the Duke's counsel to set things right again, the rubble that was his world now crumbles, smashed to dust. He finds himself in the shadow of Othello's presence, a white shadow barely perceptible behind the bright blackness of the Moor.

The Duke passes over Brabantio when he enters the Senate with Othello and then gently chastises him for his absence from the previous council. Brabantio's absence from that meeting is entirely appropriate, even necessary to our reading of his character. How would Brabantio fit into a conversation which used reason and logic to see through the "pageant" of the Turks' intent? Brabantio would have argued that the Turks were indeed headed to Rhodes, seizing on the first piece of

information available and neglecting to test it against reason.

The Duke's confirmation of Othello's marriage must sting Brabantio's sense of security about the Duke's graces and his status in the Senate. To Brabantio it must seem that the very pillars of justice betray him in his own house of law. The only reason "for nature so prepost'rously to (have) err ('d)", the only way he can make sense of these events is to find a source for the chaos, a reason for the up welling. (I.iii.62) Given the magnitude of this disruption, the pain of his loss, and the uncertainty of his position in this dark, daughterless world, it is not entirely surprising that Brabantio ignores the Duke's attempt to readjust his perspective on the Moor.

> If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
> Your son in law is far more fair than black. (I.iii 289)

Brabantio can make sense of this chaos only by forcing the world to fit his initial frame, his first perception. He is too vulnerable, too panicked to do anything but cling to his black magic theory of Othello. Even his last words in the play project a horrible twisted truth, and he offers them not as caveat but as curse.

> Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
> She has deceived her father, and may thee.
> (I.iii.292)

His words echo in the next four Acts and linger as prophecy, Brabantio's last attempt to put Othello into his 'proper' place. Othello is, indeed, deceived but only because of the nature of his seeing (if thou hast eyes to see;). His eyes see, but selectively; they see only deception but are blind to Desdemona's devotion and Cassio's loyalty.

Brabantio's insistence on categorizing Othello as a dark demon, his refusal to see Othello as he is presented to us on stage —a man of stature and equanimity— and his tenacious hold on his initial perception of the 'bestial' marriage reveal a

character blinded by prejudice. His role is fairly innocuous, however, because Othello completes his triumph of appearance when the Duke blesses the marriage. Brabantio's behavior in Act I has set the pattern for Othello's actions toward Desdemona in Acts III –V. In the wilds of Cyprus and the unknown territories of passions, love and sexuality, Othello will latch onto his initial perception of Desdemona for security, for some safe ground. His uncertainty and insecurity in these new waters will blind him to evidence which would exonerate Desdemona and divert her tragic death and his own undoing.

What is it in Othello that allows him to believe Iago's cunning? Other characters of less nobility and accomplishment are not persuaded. Iago tries to convince Roderigo that Cassio and Desdemona are in love, but he is not swayed. (II.i) Iago's manipulations can seduce Cassio to drink in (II.iii), but he resists Iago's ideas about Desdemona and insists that she is true and chaste.

> IAGO: What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley
> to provocation.
> CASS: An inviting eye; and yet me thinks right modest.

So why is Othello, a man who seemed so secure in Act I, so susceptible in Act III? Why so willing, so ripe for deception?

Othello's appearance in Act I is a carefully orchestrated triumph over what should be a scene of an alien in society, of warrior in the world of politics, of black in the midst of white, of Moor among Italians. The name "Othello" is synonymous with victory and security. He is a renowned and revered warrior. Othello embodies the common paradox associated with security. A society must condone savage and barbaric practices in order to protect civilization, justice, and truth, hence the central paradox of the nuclear age: that we keep peace by a policy of Mutually Assured Destruction. This paradox is easily accepted, but Othello is no longer just a

guard at the gate; he has entered the social network, married, in fact, a lawyer's daughter. More remarkably, his marriage to the daughter of a Venetian Senator is personally sanctioned by the Duke.

Othello holds his new social and political positions with some anxiety and trepidation, however. He is well aware that his position comes to him "from men of royal siege," (II.ii.22) and he tells Iago that he would not risk " a fortune/ As this that I have reach'd" nor would he wager his "unhoused free condition" but for the force and power of his love for Desdemona.

He is careful, too, to demonstrate his awareness by undercutting his own abilities so as not to sound too proud. His self–deprecating remark "Rude am I in my speech and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" before an eloquent speech is an act of deference to the Senators. (I.iii 81) Othello is aware of his status as "stranger" in the Senate House of this white world, and he is very conscious of the fragility of his triumph of appearance. Thus he knows he has a lot to lose.

Othello's consciousness of appearance surfaces even in his metaphors. Ironically he chooses the language of sight and perception when he resolves to keep his new roles as husband and lover separate from his more familiar affairs of military office. It is as if he knows his status rests on his triumph of appearance and he is determined to keep his professional judgment clear, and he stakes his precious reputation on it.

> When light wing'd toys
> Of feather'd Cupid seel* with wanton dullness
> My speculative*[75] and offic'd instruments
> That my disports corrupt and taint my business

75. seel = blind (literally sew shut the eyes of a hawk to tame it.
speculative = having power to see; the mind's eye
As noted in Riverside Shakespeare, p. 1210.

Let housewives make a skillet of my helm
And all indign and base adversaries
Make heed against my estimation. (I.iii 268)

Despite Othello's resolutions, his two roles of military commander and political husband merge, the warrior world dissolved by a world of passion, and the subsequent confusion clouds his carefully guarded skills of perceptions. Othello's military command in Cyprus is immediately problematic; there is no enemy to fight. The celebration of II.iii rings hollow because the victory is one of default and the outpost —a place of watchful defenses— turns quickly into a mockery, a drunken brawl. When Othello is wrest from his wedding bed he asks, "Are we turned Turk?" and marks the start of the demise of his strict military world order. He senses the melting of these distinctions when he worries that,

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And Passion, having my best judgment collied
Assays to lead the way. (II.iii 205)

and he begins to search for safe harbors in these new waters of passion, love, and vulnerability. He anchors himself on Desdemona's love —that same love he has compared to "the sea's worth," (I.ii 28) —and he begins to construct new parameters for living. The problem is that Othello uses old models for his new boundaries. The absolutes of military life, the skills of expediency and decisiveness that dictate life and death on the battlefield will damn him in a world of emotions and passion. Without a clear military command, without his world of wars, battle and brawn Othello must make Desdemona the center of his meaning. In an effort to carve some order from his confusion he sets up a world of absolutes and makes his love for her his new world order.

Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,

Chaos is come again. (III.iii 90)

As long as he loves Desdemona he can make sense of his world and his place in it, so he hangs onto this life buoy as the waters of his military life threaten to sweep him away.

But to love Desdemona and be loved by her is to be vulnerable to jealousy. No sooner does he devote himself to her than he begins to doubt her faithfulness and confusion sets in again. He runs the risk of finding his whole world subverted by the infidelity of the one person who had given it meaning. Like Brabantio who seeks certainty from the Duke and finds, instead, that chaos is condoned, Othello now is twice tossed —first from the world of military clarity and now from the assurance of being loved.

Othello's confusion is deep and torments him because his suspicion threatens his very existence. "By the world,/ I think my wife is honest, and think she is not." (III.iii 384) Othello is incapable of living in a world where what is, is not. He rebels against such uncertainty and doubt.

No! to be once in doubt
Is once to be resolved. (III.iii 179)

It is too terrible to bear the not knowing so he demands "Give me ocular proof!" (360) "Make me see't" (364) and "Give me living reason she's disloyal.(410) These are the cries of a man earnest in his attempts to see the truth, but who is predisposed to see a steadfast resolution. He craves an answer because he needs something to steady his whirling world. So, short of "grossly gaping on," he is satiated by Iago's fictions. (III.iii 460) He demands proof of Desdemona's infidelity but is consoled by Iago's story of Cassio's dream —a double fiction. Less than an hundred lines after his demand for evidence he is completely taken in by Iago's story and declares, "I'll tear her all to pieces."

Like Brabantio grasping at the first plausible explanation for his daughter's deception, Othello latches onto Iago's fictive reality. One man's telling of another man's dream is hardly "ocular proof," but Othello needs to know something, he must have some certainty to keep from drowning in doubt. Just as Brabantio's belief in the sanctity of Venice vanished, never to be believed again, so is Othello severed from the world of "pride, pomp and circumstance," where a warrior's judgment is clear.

He literally cannot hear nor can he understand the world he has left behind when he declares, "Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone." (III.iii 357) He distorts and revises the charade that Iago directs between Cassio and Bianca. It might be that he is as likely at this point to decide she is true as to decide she is false. It is his need for resolution– one way or another– that drives his prejudice. Iago asks Othello to "encave" himself and to "but mark (Cassio's) gesture." (IV.i 81)
Othello interpolates his preconceived meaning onto the scene and later call Cassio's antics a confession. (V.ii 68) Othello becomes so immediately invested in his "anticipative judgment"of Desdemona that he speaks a language no one can understand. Desdemona complains that she cannot comprehend him.

> What does your speech import?
> I understand a fury in your words,
> But not the words. (IV.ii 33)

Worse still Othello's ears are so clogged with pestilence and prejudice that they cannot hear Desdemona's innocent pleas when she cries I am "your wife, my lord, your true and loyal wife." (IV.ii 35) He insists on calling her whore and she protests, but Othello, rather than accept her truth, protects his false perception by clinging to the notion that his wife is a "whore of Venice" so this woman in front of him must not be his wife.

> I cry you mercy then.

I took you for that cunning whore of Venice
That married with Othello. (IV.ii 88)

Nothing can wake him from this fog until Desdemona is dead. Her death releases him from the grip of his own passions and Emilia's knocking wakes him to his deed.

There are several opportunities to disclose the truth and avert the tragedy, but Othello's eyes and ears are prejudice to Desdemona's cries of innocence. He can see her only in the context of his own construction, as the foundation for an artificial state of security which he has built around her. He can only hear her voice as the echo of Brabantio's prediction and in the chorus of Venetian whores. He seeks certainty and so twists and turns the truth to satisfy his need for stability —for some life buoy in the tumultuous seas of passion.

Shakespeare's Othello is a study in such common human anxieties as insecurity, vulnerability, and fear of rejection. To understand Othello only in terms of a racial psychology is to limit the scope of his character. What brilliance, really, to reveal the workings of prejudice —the narrowing of sight and distorting of sound— in a man who might have been portrayed simply as a victim. Othello becomes a symbol of such familiar human hangups as feeling alien in society and fearing rejection. He works out those universal insecurities in his own tragic prejudice against Desdemona. Othello's propensity for prejudice stems not from a special iniquity inherent in him but from a need to find some safety and security in his own chaotic world.

Using sites of learning as a lens to examine our own readings.

Focusing students on the universal human struggles at the heart of most rich literature allows them a way to personalize the reading experience and helps them to use the text to transport them into another world. Asking them to examine sites of a character's learning lends itself, then, to assignments and reflection about their own learning, their own perspective and how that perspective might be read in multiple ways. An interpretation such as this opens the literature to students who are from various cultures and backgrounds. It offers insight on the universal struggle of learning how to see and make sense of the world, and invites us to understand how our perspectives can limit our vision and how our vision might collide with another's.

The moments of negotiation of perspectives about a scene, a character, or the site of someone's learning are the moments of possibility in a diverse classroom. Again Hill's belief that the deep differences in the languages of African-American students and Euro-American students reveal different and pliable spatial orientations. He writes that "As educators become aware of how students from various ethnocultural backgrounds differ in their use of spatial and temporal points of view, they well gain a respect for how deeply language differences run." With that respect teachers can encourage students to negotiate their differences and use dialogue to understand points of departure and set forth to create a vision together.

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